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❝ "My son," Spoke that voice. That voice that chased him like helpless prey in nightmares. That voice which prickled through his skin like thorns. There the owner of the voice stood, dignity sitting like a crown on his head. As the sun broke over the land, the light sliced over his kingly appearance. His brilliant amber eyes were enameled with electricity. Wolfstar grinned wickedly, "Welcome home." ❞

- acethespace ; monster

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synopsis:

After their daring escape from Wolfstar's tyranny, Stormrunner and Violetsky find refuge in the old WindClan territory, where they discover the long-sought Rebellion. However, their dreams of a hopeful resistance are quickly shattered; the Rebellion is plagued by internal conflicts, dwindling resources, and the ever-looming threat of destruction.

Despite the myths, the Rebellion is on the brink of collapse. Faced with these daunting challenges, Stormrunner and Violetsky must decide whether to stand loyally with WindClan and fight to restore hope, or risk watching the symbol of their defiance crumble.

As tensions rise and enemies close in, their courage and determination will be tested like never before.

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caution: please be aware that this story does contain things such as blood, gore, violence, mention of death, and other themes someone may find disturbing. if anyone of this offends you, this isn't the book for you.

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credits: warrior cats rightfully belongs to erin hunter but any original character rightfully belongs to me. graphic designers are credited before the writing in the chapter

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this story is dedicated to my incredible online friend, renakii-/fallenfern you have been one of my most helpful and caring followers for years now. you have gifted me so much support and assistance; I really couldn't ask for more. and your stunning graphics have painted my books so beautifully. there are not enough words to express my gratitude. *Thank you for everything.*

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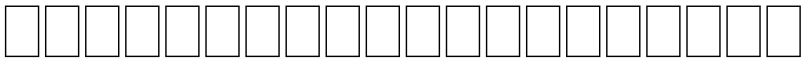

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i | prologue

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a few years before...

The march back home was a painful one. Defeat hung heavy in the atmosphere like a thick fog, easing the once-mighty warriors to their death. Though the single, sole survivor suffocated in the haze. He suffered alone in the *chaos*; both the physical and mental pain of war tearing him limb from limb.

But something deep in his bones refused to be stowed away. It blazed and burned and pushed the warrior back to his paws. His breath rattled out through his lungs as he tried to gain back his strength. Despite his attempt to focus on reaching home, his mind flashed with memories. The merciless spark in his enemy's eyes, the cries of his friends as they reached their ends. The warrior stumbled.

Why did I survive? Why did StarClan choose me? The soldier's thoughts turmoiled endlessly. But he limped onward, each staggering step marked with the red splash of blood.

"Falconrain?" It was a relief to hear a familiar voice. "Oh, StarClan," The sound belonged to his Clan's medicine cat. Her faint *thudding* of paws neared the battle-scarred tom as she rushed to his side. Her strongly scented herbs soothed the warrior.

"Is there anyone else?" Her question tore his heart all over again. The screams from his Clanmates echoed in his head. "Falconrain? Are you alright?"

"N- No-" The tawny tom stumbled over his words. "They're dead. All of them."

The healer gasped. Her eyes flashed with millions of emotions. Falconrain could tell she didn't want to believe his words, but all he was speaking was true. "Even..." The she-cat tilted her head as she addressed Falconrain's partner.

"Yes... Even her." Tears pricked the tom's eyes as he thought of his she-cat. He didn't get the chance to say *goodbye*. His world without her would be a war he couldn't bear to win.

"I'm so sorry." The medicine cat tended against the tom as she supported his weight. "Let's get you home, Falconrain."

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The darkness of the den was oddly offsetting. The newly nurtured Falconrain paused at the entrance, a shiver of doubt sailing down his spine. "Mother?" His voice resounded off the empty banks.

As he crept forward into the darkness, the quick blink of white fur caught his eye. "Mother!" The she-cat was sprawled on the cold floor, her blurred eyes swamped with agony. Falconrain crouched by the motherly figure. "Mother, what's happening?"

"My son..." Her silent voice stung the air. "They're coming."

"Who?" Falconrain was struck by a wave of terror as he thought she was foretelling another battle. "Who's coming?"

Then suddenly, a small smile spilled onto the she-cat's face. She whispered ever so softly, "The heroes, my boy. The heroes are coming."

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ii | save the world

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The buzz of excitement was almost as loud as the *thrumming* of her heart. She sat in the center surrounded by various colors of sparkling eyes; her presence shifting from tongues of the cats. *"Why are they here?" "I bet they work for Wolfstar." "They're nothing but impostors."*

Though, the she-cat's attention was soon turned away from the Clan's rustling rumors. Violetsky noticed an elderly she-cat, waiting by the sides of her den. Her fur glimmered under the beam of light streaming from the opening on the roof of her den. Despite Violetsky's intense gazing, the elder wasn't staring back. Instead, her eyes were glued on Violetsky's companion, Stormrunner.

Violetsky became swamped with uncertainty. Stormrunner and the elder did seem surprisingly similar; they both possessed slim builds and had an unusual fire boiling beneath their eyes. She decided to push away these mindless thoughts as she needed to focus on the commotion before her.

"I'm starting to think this wasn't the best idea," Stormrunner's gentle mew tickled the she-cat's ear.

She nodded, "Give them time. After all, we are aliens to them." Violetsky took a quick glimpse back at the alabaster elder, only to find she wasn't there. "We'll have to earn our respect."

Just as the words left Violetsky's tongue, the shining she-cat appeared paw-steps before the newcomers. Violetsky found herself breathless as the elder's fur rippled with sparkles under the bare daylight. "My faithful Clan," The elderly leader addressed, silencing her cats almost instantly, "Give a warm welcome to our heroes."

Heroes? Violetsky tensed with shock.

The crown of cats seemed as startled as Violetsky. The welcome they presented was everything but warm. Their furs bunched into spikes as their eyes sharpened with hostility. "You must be joking. They look as though they were dumped on the thunderpath!" Laughter echoed through the fields.

Violetsky could feel herself melting in embarrassment. She flattened her ears in an attempt to lock out the laughter.

"Might I just add in," A tom pompously stepped forward from the crowd. His golden fur drooped before his dark eyes, though it wasn't long enough to hide his jagged scars. "How do we know these cats aren't searching to stir up trouble? There seem to be more than enough foxes these days." The tom hissed while creeping toward Stormrunner, their whiskers inches apart from entangling. "I can smell the deceit sweating from their bones-"

"Back off, Buzzardfoot." The interception was of a deep voice.

Both Violetsky and Stormrunner directed their attention to the sound.
He was a sturdy tom, his fur shaded black with chestnut splatters. Similar to the other tom, he was covered in battle wounds. His youth buried under his scars.

"They're not a danger to us- look, Buzzardfoot, you're scaring them." The tortoiseshell's optics flashed with explosive emotions. It was almost as though Violetsky could see the fury fuming off his frame. *This tom had been angry for a while.*

Buzzardfoot flattened his ears, "What I'm hearing is that you're willing to let some *strangers* into our Clan and claim them as heroes. Since the day we were kits, we've been tested of our strength, *dying* to prove our loyalty. You of all cats should know this, Falconrain." The tom inched closer, scowling wordlessly under his breath.

"You have no right to say that." Falconrain's voice strangely softened; the quiet before the storm. "You have not lived my life. Don't dare tell me what I should or should not think."

"Then tell me," Buzzardfoot cleared his throat. "Are these the cats

that look like heroes? Are they going to save our world?"

Falconrain hesitated. His clever eyes rotated to fix upon Stormrunner and Violetsky. They skipped back and forth, back and forth. But each time his optics landed on Stormrunner, something flashed in his mind. He winced.

Falconrain inhaled deeply as he faced Buzzardfoot once again. Slowly, the noble warrior bore the truth:

"They already have."

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iii | dreaming of freedom

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"What a terrifying thing it is, to be yourself."

The pale gray she-cat could feel the sadness bubbling beneath her eyes. Uncovering the wounds of her past burned her insides like a great wildfire. Though, she knew now was not the time to be vulnerable. "It was a long time ago."

The other she-cat in the den flicked her ears. Her stunning amber eyes shone through the darkness of the den with great mercy. "I feel your pain." She murmured as she ducked her head. "I know what it's like to lose someone you love."

Her silent sound rung the room with great power. Each cat was stained with foreboding memories from their past. *It was an inevitable fate.*

Falconrain, the tortoiseshell tom from moments ago, tensed. He sat to the left of Violetsky, twitching every second or so. Violetsky raised her gaze in suspicion. She could feel the wrath radiating from his body. *What happened to you?* She wondered.

"That's why we must stop this war," Stormrunner suddenly spoke up. "We can protect lives from destruction."

The leader did not appreciate the tom's response. Her eyes flashed with slight concern. "I once knew a tom who believed such things as you." The aging leader began to slowly pace the edges of the den. Her alabaster tufts bristled gradually. "It did not end well for him."

"Stormrunner was only stating his mind- he didn't mean to offend you." Violetsky skipped to defend her friend. The tension between her and the leader was rapidly increasing.

Falconrain scowled under his breath. "Your friend's mind is twisted." He laughed to himself. "War is a natural, inescapable doom. You wish to just... Get rid of it?"

Violetsky's ears flattened in annoyance. Her mouth cracked to shout, but Echostar intercepted.

"You have a good heart, both of you do. I don't doubt that for a second." Her ambers flickered between the two companions. "But I'm torn between the life of my Clan and the good of the forest. I crave to help you, I want peace. But my duty as a leader is to protect my clanmates, not send them into war."

Violetsky twitched with irritation. "You have to listen to me, please!"

Echostar swayed her head. "I'm sorry, Violetsky."

"No!" Violetsky could sense the grief unraveling in her soul. "Please, I've lost everything. I need this chance." The she-cat clung on to what she had dreamed about years ago. She went back to the night she stargazed with Adderpaw and dreamed of freedom. The memory was quickly followed by Adderpaw's murder. She could still feel each piece of her heart crumble as Adderpaw wished her *goodbye*. Her mind churned with each heart-wrenching memory.

"Violetsky, relax." Stormrunner wrapped his tail around the ghastly she-cat. Within seconds, she thrashed around her claws, hooking onto his face. She shoved the tom off of her. Tears spilled into her whiskers as memories struck her like bullets.

"You murdered him!" She screamed. She remembered everything; Stormrunner's sparkling blue eyes, the hatred on his face, his unsheathed, bloodied claws. "I hate you." Her voice was ever so soft and serious. So serious, Stormrunner was stunned to the spot.

He watched, drowning in his own puddle of affliction, as the love of his life stormed away.
It was a reoccurring event in his past; the ones he loved leaving him in pieces. He wanted to ignore the feelings of hopelessness but it was his bloodline.

"My, son. I am so sorry."

Son? Stormrunner was surprised to find Echostar was speaking to him. He moved his focus from Violetsky to the elderly leader. It had been a long time since anyone addressed him as *son.*

"It's not your fault." Stormrunner shrugged while glancing at Falconrain. "We've both been through so much. Scars don't heal so easily."

Echostar smiled softly as she studied the ex-warrior. "You're exactly right." There was a beat of silence between the three cats. The hot mess of emotions rendering through the walls. "Have I met you before?"

Stormrunner frowned, "Never."

But as the leader's question fully sank in, Stormrunner was noticing there was something strangely familiar about her. It was almost as though-

Stormrunner's thoughts were suddenly intercepted.

"Mother, I think it's time to give them a rest," Falconrain grumbled as he neared the leader's side. He gave the gray warrior an unappreciative glare. "Plus, I think Stormrunner here should clear the air with his friend," He tilted his head, giving an obvious indication that Stormrunner should leave.

Was Falconrain envious? Stormrunner's eyes fell onto the soldier. There was a spark, a passion, behind the tom's blazing orbs. Stormrunner decided to push away the feeling. He strode slowly towards the exit. "You're right," He mumbled. "Thank you." He gave Echostar a small smile before disappearing.

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iv | all of your regrets

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aesthetic by faithwishes-

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The harsh winter wind was almost as sharp as a shard of glass piercing skin. His fur bellowed backward as he climbed over the large hills. But as strong as the winds were, nothing could keep him apart from Violetsky.

The midnight sky stretched above the tapering hills, creating a base for a peaceful night. The way the stars sparkled together was something that always interested Stormrunner. Although he wasn't much of a dreamer, there was something about midnight that spurred emotions in him.

Even though Stormrunner's devotion to the she-cat could never be broken, he approached her with much nervousness. Without words, he sat beside her, following her eyes into the never-ending sky. Silence was the only sound between them.

Without looking at Stormrunner, Violetsky spoke, "You know I would never lie." She paused, the truthfulness of her words too dense to soak in. "So when I said I loved you, it was the truth. I love you, Stormrunner."

What Violetsky said was indeed the truth, she was no liar. But instead of feeling relief, Stormrunner couldn't push past the events before this moment. He had never seen Violetskly so upset. It all seemed so real. It scared him.

"I was-" The pale she-cat stumbled as she searched for the right words. "I was furious. I've been waiting for this moment for all of my life. I keep thinking of all the helpless prisoners still stuck in Wolfstar's camp. I keep thinking back to when I was one of them, I wanted a hero." The pale cat paused and closed her eyes. Inhaling

deeply, she overpowered her sorrowful sensations. Opening her eyes, she gazed at Stormrunner intently. "I was lucky I found mine."

Stormrunner didn't acknowledge her last comment, instead he frowned, "And Adderpaw?" He tilted his head as he examined his friend. "You know I didn't-"

"I know!" Violetsky shouted as she prevented Stormrunner from further explaining what happened that night. Her heart's beating rapidly increased as the tension stiffened between the two. She knew she couldn't avoid the truth forever.

"Please tell me what's wrong, Violetsky," Stormrunner begged in slight frustration. "You can't even say his name. You tense up every time he's mention. And you act as though you're avoiding something." The scarred tom was gentle with his words, but Violetsky could see the clear confusion he held. "Do you hate me for what I've done? For what happened that night?"

Violetsky's breath staggered as she fought for an answer. What happened to Adderpaw was many moons ago, though the pain that inflicted Violetsky suggested it occurred yesterday. "I loved him, Stormrunner."

"You barely knew him." The tom flattened his ears.

Violetsky knew Adderpaw now walked with the stars, but the feeling of his presence was compelling. "It felt like I had known him for years. Adderpaw was sweet and so brave." Her eyes lifted into the starry sky. "He spoke with his soul and dreamed with his whole heart." Violetsky paused, searching deep within herself. "And the reality of never seeing him again hurts." Tears dribbled from her eyelids and tangled into her web for whiskers. "It hurts so badly, Stormrunner." The she-cat lost her words in her sobs.

Stormrunner comprehended her words in harsh silence. He felt worthless; like all the love he had spared Violetsky meant *nothing* to her. He risked his family, his life for her. And all of it meant nothing. Anger pulsed through his veins. Instead of comforting Violetsky, he bluntly spat, "He's dead, Violetsky!"

His words stunned the she-cat. She froze with sudden shock.

"He's gone!" Stormrunner shouted bitterly. "He can't love you, he's dead!" Stormrunner didn't realize how atrocious he had become until he noticed Violetsky backing away. Her lavender optics were enlarged with terror. *She was afraid of him.*

The tom swiftly shook himself awake as realization hit him hard: was he turning into Wolfstar? The reason his father is the monster he is today was because of his uncontrolled anger. Stormrunner glanced down at his unsheathed claws- was he following his father's pawsteps?

"Stormrunner," Violetsky glanced at Stormrunner, then at his claws, then back to him again. She couldn't speak; there were no right words to say. Her emotions hung, twisted in the air; she wanted to scream at Stormrunner but she also felt the need to embrace him.

"I'm sorry, Violetsky, please-"

"I can't." Violetsky pulled away.

"You can't what?" Stormrunner wanted to change everything that just happened. Looking for trouble always ends in trouble. And now his relationship with Violetsky was damaged.

"I can't love you like this." Violetsky exhaled heavily. The nighttime wind howled in the cups of her ears. The long grasses tickled her legs as she stood hopelessly gazing at the one who she once believed she loved.

Stormrunner opened his mouth as he ventured to justify himself. But a sudden rustling behind the bushes made both cats swivel their heads. Their attention was shifted from their problem to the disturbance.

A pair of green eyes unfolded behind the shrubbery. "My, my, look what we have here," A low voice growled.

Without thinking, Stormrunner sprung in front of Violetsky, his fur rising into spikes. "Who's there?" He snarled while moving closer to protect his friend.

A black figure slipped from the undergrowth, revealing himself. Both Stormrunner and Violetsky were horrified to their very bones. *It was Fangs.* A vicious grin smeared across his features, "All of your regrets."

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v | never trust a runner

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Was he the monster his father wanted him to be? The taste of blood boiled on his tongue. His bruised body ached for some rest; he exhaled exhaustion like air. Despite his eyes growing heavy, anger fueled his every movement. He would do whatever it took to keep his loved ones safe. Memories flashed like dying lights in his mind; *the silver clash of claws, a final scream before destruction, the dark sky embedding on his shoulders.* His single blue eye blurred at the sight of Fangs *dead* beneath his paws. Stormrunner couldn't swallow his thoughts.

His beloved she-cat made no sound. Her aura was haunted by the eerie scent of death. "Violetsky?" Stormrunner hissed beneath his heavy breath. He crept closer, every hair on his back spiking with horror. She was sprawled on the ground, the long grasses sheltering her ever-so elegant build. But her eyes were locked closed. "Violetsky?" Stormrunner poked again, panic chilling his bones. There was no response. *Was she dea-* The tired tom thrust the thought from his head. *There was no way she could've been.* His life was devoted to protecting her. Stormrunner walked the Earth all for Violetsky. If the stars had taken her away so soon, Stormrunner would never forgive himself.

The sudden rustling of paws awoke the tom from the back of his mind.

The blaze of green eyes captured Stormrunner's attention. They held him hostage in a state of shock; so alike to the ones he presently killed. As the owner of the eyes swayed closer, the bare moonlight lightened his patterned fur, revealing himself. It was Falconrain, the mighty warrior rouged from battles. But instead of crawling with sympathy, his eyes were firm with bitter emotion.

"Please help me," Stormrunner begged, his voice shaking with slight

hysteria.

Falconrain simply stood, Stormrunner's request bouncing off the walls of his ears. His eyes sharpened like daggers. The tom pondered, "Wouldn't you know," He whispered while his focus drifted over to Violetsky lain in the grass. "Sometimes someone can wear a mask so long that they forget what was once beneath it."

Stormrunner flinched at the brutality of his words. "What do you mean?"

Falconrain snickered under his breath at the fear churning within the tom's one blue eye. In the darkness, alone, at last, Falconrain was pleased to see Stormrunner suffer. "No worries," The tortoiseshell tom took a mighty leap towards Stormrunner, his paws splattering in Fang's blood. His nose was barely inches away from Stormrunner's as he could feel the tom's breath tickling his whiskers. "Because in the end, we all become stories."

Stormrunner's eyes widened. "Falconrain," He knew what was about to take place. His bones screamed, preparing every inch of his body for danger. "Don't do this." He cowered backward, already in pain. How much more could he take?

There was a pause of silence as the two toms gazed at each other. Hope was very thin; it rested between the break of the sky and the earth. Though it only lasted a second.

Falconrain's claws slid slowly from their sockets. His orbs were like a fire cutting through the murky atmosphere, reflecting danger. "I have to."

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Her eyes slowly lifted to an abyss of midnight. Bundles of stars stretched across the empty black sky but sparkled magnificently. A gentle breeze soothed her backside as the grasses beneath her seemed to float her to her paws. Despite the temperature seeming to frost, there was peace. Strange and faint; panic seemed not to exist. Violetsky blinked, hoping to clear away the cloud of confusion. *Where am I?*

As if reading her mind, a heavy voice answered her. "You're dreaming."

Violetsky spun in momentary horror. The dream-like atmosphere was suddenly hidden under the blanket of a nightmare. "Wolfstar?" Her eyes fell upon the dictator. He was dark and tall and a spark of something, *or someone*, reminiscent. The fair she-cat was swiftly overtaken with a manifesting passion. Her skin surged in hatred.

Wolfstar grinned, "Finally," His low voice teased, "My eyes can rest upon the prisoner I've heard so much about." The leader moved from his resting position. Every bit of him surrounded the she-cat, his eyes devouring her features. "You don't look like anything special."

Her focus was unbalanced, Violetsky was light-headed. Although it was true, she was dreaming, everything felt too real. The emotions, the landscape, the villain were all alive in truth. "Am I dead?"

The large leader chuckled as he moved away, "I wish."

Violetsky didn't find his response pleasant. He continued, "As I mentioned before, you're dreaming. We're having an interactive vision. StarClan does this sometimes, whether on accident or on purpose, I know not. But I am real; I am really talking to you." The impatience in the tom's words were truly nervewracking. Violetsky did everything in her power not to let herself tremble.

"Poor little Stormrunner was caught in quite some trouble." Wolfstar leaned back in light satisfaction as he taunted Violetsky. He sighed, "I always doubted his ability to fight; he was never worth any of my time-"

"Shut up!" Violetsky was daring to interfere with the dictator. "He's everything you can never be; a hero!"

Wolfstar burst in chaotic laughter. His vivid orange eyes widened with amusement. "Oh Violetsky," He purred, catching his breath. "Heroes win battles."

The she-cat's claws tore at the grass below her. A sensation spread

like a flame through her bones, something she had never known so sincerely before. "I hate you." She shivered at her own seriousness. "You're a monster."

The crazy enthusiasm quickly died within Wolfstar. He frowned, this face scrunching in deep thought. He then glanced up. "Aren't we all?" The solemn mockery behind Wolfstar's eyes blazed through Violetsky's soul. He gazed at her as if he had the world figured out. He knew something about her- *about them.* Violetsky's very core rocked with unease.

"Despite my son's inability to fight, he was always destined to follow my footsteps."

It all came clear to Violetsky. Wolfstar knew about the fire they had set on the rogue's campsite. Wolfstar was the one who adopted fire as a weapon. He used it to rule the forest; it destroyed Violetsky's home. *Now it was destroying her.*

"No!" She cried. "No, no, no," Tears settled on the edges of her eyes. "It was a mistake! Stomrunner will never be like you."

"Oh, is that so?" Wolfstar held a hard challenge. His tail twitched as he gazed at the she-cat like he had all the answers. He suddenly sprang to his paws, once again pacing circles around Violetsky. "Let this be a warning, a prophecy if you wish, young molly." He grew closer, the edges of his fur poking Violetsky. "I've been told a story of Stormrunner's return. He's going to come back to me."

"I don't believe you." Violetsky's defiance was calm. She straightened herself, staring deep into the dictator's orange eyes.

"And I will not make you." Wolfstar leaned in closer, his nose level with hers. "But let this dwell, after all, he was named Storm*runner.* Because he runs away from his battles." Wolfstar's whisper scared Violetsky; not because he was quiet, but because he was earnest. "You've been his hardest fight yet and I've been foreseeing his return."

Violetsky's eyes expanded in horror. "He won't-" She breathed, her heart thrumming loudly in her chest.

Wolfstar's contemplation glowed with approval. The grin plastered on his lips was brighter than the stars above them. "He will-."

Violetsky couldn't uphold the urge to be brave. In all sooth, she was soaked with tears. However much Violetsky didn't want to believe the leader, he always proved himself right. Wolfstar may have been raised in all evil, but he was no liar.

"Awe, darling, don't cry." Wolfstar cooed as he slithered around the small she-cat. He placed his feathery tail along her shoulders. But his sympathy was laced with deception. "Didn't your mother ever teach you: never trust a runner."

"I never truly met my mother."

Wolfstar ruptured into sinful laughter. "Oh, that's right." With only the small comment, he reopened the wounds on Violetsky without actually laying a claw on her. Violetsky felt alive and dead at the same time.

"Listen closely, young one," Wolfstar's mood swiftly shifted. His dangerous nature drove Violetsky backward, shivering in fear. "Don't you dare testify to me. You won't ever win; *nobody ever has*." His words were like fuel to a fire. "And just remember, I'm everything you can't control." All Violetsky could see was fire; in his eyes, in her blood, in her memories. She burned in suffering.

Wolfstar sensed her pain. He laughed viciously as he watched her collapse to ashes. Finally, he disappeared, his absence leaving a trail of sweet relief.

And Violetsky awoke to a pale dawn.

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vi | sticking around

[image]

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a few days later

Sunlight flourished through the campsite. For the first time in a long time, the forest seemed to sparkle. Nature stretched out its sore wings and soaked in the sunshine. The brilliant blue sky remained graciously clear; cloudless and a lovely plain. Warmth engulfed the aching warriors, soothing them into a soundless sleep. Everything and everyone was at ease. For once it was peaceful.

But Stormrunner couldn't let himself rest.

The darkness of the den shadowed away the sunlight. A cool, nail-biting suspense overspread the atmosphere under the roof of the den. The shade was dusky and refused to provide sympathy. The tom sat in a slump, the chilled temperature appeasing his decoration of scars. The edges of his claws *rapped* impatiently against the hard ground of the den. Sadness unfolded in his chest as his eyes lay upon his loved one. Violetsky was surely alive, but she hadn't awoken from her slumber in a few days. Each rising dawn, Stormrunner grew more and more anxious-

"You must let her rest." A voice intercepted the tom's worrying. "She definitely won't awaken with a sad cloud standing over her." The medicine cat sharply said, shooting a small glare at the tom.

"She's been resting for long enough," Stormrunner grunted. "Wouldn't you agree?" His single blue eye slit with challenge as he stared at the healer. She gazed back, her irritated silence spiking with her fur. Moments passed fleetingly and hidden within their deep gaze, Stormrunner found himself attracted to the medicine cat. She was modestly pretty; a slender frame bearing long, lush beige fur. Her yellow eyes were the peak of her appearance, emphasizing every thought that flapped through her brain. But they were

nothing compared to Violetsky's.

"Have you no faith?" The medicine cat hissed under her breath. A frown scarred her features as she studied Stormrunner before her. She seemed shocked by his aroma of negativity.

Stormrunner glanced down sadly, "I have too much to sacrifice to be only relying on faith." He was brought back to the rending memories of him and Violetsky; she was too much to lose. Stormrunner's heart would never heal if he was left without her.

The she-cat paused in her response. Frankly, the tom had stolen her tongue. There were not many cats whose hearts shone brighter than their pelts. It had been a long time since she talked to someone like Stormrunner. She suddenly cleared her throat, shaking away the memories that stuck and stung like thorns. "I think it's best if you go and catch some sunlight. Live in the moment as there are not many days where it is so peaceful."

Stormrunner slowly shook his head. "How can I?" He questioned quite bitterly. "I can't think straight. I can't sleep at night. I toss and turn in nightmares of-"

"Your fear of loneliness will only intensify if you don't socialize."

Stormrunner was stopped in bewilderment. *How did she know that? How did she know that he was afraid of being alone*? Stormrunner backtracked, realizing that he had never stated he was lonely before. Suddenly, everything he wanted to say was clogged in the back of his throat.

"Go on." The medicine cat urged the warrior.

Stormrunner flattened his thoughts. Without saying another word, he slipped from the den and became swamped in heat. Suspicions traced in his wonder, he always knew medicine cats were clever, but never so foresighted. Before the tattered tom could muse much more, he clashed into something, or rather, someone. The tom tumbled along the ground, the dust lifting and intoxicating the air.

Stormrunner was quick to his paws, embarrassment hot in his chest.

"My, my, I am so sorry." He meowed while trying to examine the figure he stumbled over. The dust screened his view, but surely the figure had to have been small for someone as nimble as Stormrunner to easily trip over. "I could use my one eye as an excuse, but then that makes me look foolish." Stormrunner chuckled to himself. "Sorry buddy, I really didn't see you there."

"That's okay." A very quiet voice meowed. "I get it a lot."

Stormrunner, now intrigued, squinted hard to examine the figure. He blinked a few times, clearing the piling dust from his eyelid. And as Stormrunner's single blue eye laid upon the voice, he wasn't surprised he stumbled over him. *Oh, he's tiny.*

"Wow..." The small tom whispered, his round chocolate eyes falling into Stormrunner's. "You're a real warrior!" Stormrunner wasn't quite sure what the apprentice meant by that, but him saying it otherwise made his heart melt in his chest.

"Thanks, bud. But really, I think I'm more of a loner." The large gray tom studied the small cat. He was definitely the runt of the litter, although he was young. His fur was a deep chestnut color, the orange pigment was very eye-catching. But the apprentice had unusual patterns of white thrown onto his fur; it was as though he had splashed in a puddle of white paint.

The apprentice frisked his tail. He raised his head in a know-it-all matter, "Well my friends tell me scars are the sign of a great warrior."

"Or a weak one." Stormrunner's dark tone drooped the mood. He was brought back to the times when his father beat him and scold him. If only he was good enough-

"My name's Bramblepaw." The energetic apprentice introduced. His bubbling round eyes seemed to spark something within Stormrunner. Whether it was because he was standing under the boiling sunlight or this apprentice's eyes, he became hot with an energy. "What's yours?"

"Stormrunner." Stormrunner didn't sincerely appreciate his name.

He knew his father had given it to him, so of course, he figured there was some dark meaning behind it. He was always running.

"I like it! So, hey Stormrunner, maybe you'll stick around for a while?" Bramblepaw tilted his head, curiosity knawing at the edges of his eyes.

Stormrunner glanced back towards the medicine den. All of him wanted to run back to Violetsky and curl up with her. He wanted to protect her; to be the first one she sees when she awakens. But there used to be a phrase his mentor always told him: *When one door closes, another one opens*. He looked back down at the gleaming apprentice and grinned, "Maybe I will."

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vii | bramblepaw

[image]

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"So what's your story?" The question burned the air. It was one that didn't rest easily. A topic that brought back flashes of memories too quickly; the good but mostly the bad. The big browned eye tom may have been young, but he felt as though he had seen the world. And to him, the world wasn't very pretty.

"I wish I didn't have one." Bramblepaw meowed quietly. "I wish I could start over."

The winds roar louder when everything falls apart. The rain scourged the roofs of the den, creating a cacophonous symphony. The long grasses lashed in the edges of wind, swinging and swaying to avoid the harsh confrontation. A she-cat stood, bearing the storm, her eyes blurring under the heavy downfall. "I hate you!" She screamed. She burned in hatred. "I have always hated you."

Stormrunner tilted his head, quite shocked such a young tom was speaking such words. Surely, he had to have been exaggerating. "What makes you say that?"

"I don't regret anything." A large shadow stood opposing the she-cat. His eyes blazed with a callous emotion. His dark fur seemed to make his eyes glow vividly. The scars on his appearance matched the scars in his mind. "Kill me if you must, but I will always be alive in your memories."

Bramblepaw's stomach clenched with unease. Despite the blaring sun and the flame of the daylight, he was chilled to the bone with scarring memories. He swallowed the pain in his throat, "I don't have anyone." Loneliness clung to his appearance as a thorn clings to skin. "My mother died after giving birth to me and my littermates. I was the only one to survive."

Stormrunner's ears flattened with a feeling of heavy sorrow. "And your father?"

"After her death, he went mad." Bramblepaw suddenly started shivering; feverishly, quickly. He was tormented by his past to such a level where he could still feel the claws shredding through his skin. "He shoved me,"

The darkness of the den never felt like home. It's dusk walls built a prison around the kit, and he was a prisoner. The thrumming of pawsteps haunted not only his nightmares, but his real life. His husky father barged through the den, his eyes awake with anger. The kit screeched in helplessness but nothing could stop the warrior. He tossed the kit aside, shoving him from the den and into the frigidness of the night.

"Clawed me,"

In this moment, death would be easier. Blood dribbled from the side of his face, boiling his skin. Wounds painted his appearance in a bright, red, sickly plasma. He cried and begged his father to stop, but he acted deaf. His father's claws kept him down by chains of destruction. There was no sympathy.

"Cursed my well-being."

"You useless rat," A loud, thundering voice burst above the kit. Sharp claws penetrated his sides, forcing his eyes to stare deep within the shadows. "Not even StarClan could love you." The large tom tossed down his kit, crushing his happiness under his claws.

Stormrunner was sick with shock. He could feel his snack from earlier coursing through his stomach. No wonder Bramblepaw was a jittering mess. He was frightened and abandoned from a young age. Stormrunner was without words.

Bramblepaw's eyes sank down to the ground beneath his paws. He caressed the soft blades of grasses tickling his legs. "But when I thought I had no one, someone showed up. My mother's sister, who I didn't realize cared for me, protected me."

"How dare you treat your son like that?" The rain splattered across her face, blending with her tears. Anger surged through her veins, mimicking the winds which tore at the grounds. "You're a disgrace!" The she-cat was suddenly struck by sudden seriousness. Her heart screamed in her ears. "I could kill you."

Stormrunner ruffled his fur. He already felt like he knew the ending, but still, he questioned, "What happened?"

Bramblepaw locked perceptions with Stormrunner. His features were carved with graveness. Who knew someone so energetic could also be so down? The young tom swallowed hard as if he were still trying to comprehend what happened. "She killed him."

"Don't try and fool me." The large tom laughed viciously. "I know you don't have the heart to do such a thing." His manipulation circled the she-cat. His laughing caught in the wind and seemed to echo from every crevice.

The she-cat stood tall. A single stream of tears trickled down the left side of her face. Her sister was gone because of this tom. The one she had loved most in her life, the one she would kill for. It was all gone. "I will protect the ones I love." Suddenly, her claws slipped from their sockets. They sparkled under the falling rain, threatening death. Her mind tossed and turned like a mighty ocean. Passion was hot in her bones as she circled with the tom. Shooting daggers for glares; it was unlike her to act in such a way. But she was starving for vengeance. And hungry warriors will do whatever it takes to fill their bellies...

There was silence between the two toms. The gap dividing them was like a soundless river separating two banks. In truth, Stormrunner didn't know how to look at Bramblepaw. Who knew someone could hold such a story behind strong eyes? "Bramblepaw- I-"

"It's okay." The ginger and white tom flicked his ears in dismissal. "I didn't mean to upset you- I-" Bramblepaw stumbled over his words. "I need somebody. Loneliness has kept me prisoner for too long."

Stormrunner nodded his head vigorously. He couldn't agree with Bramblepaw more. Stormrunner was desolate, shunned by his

family, friendless, he deemed no one would understand him. To his surprise, someone as young as an apprentice understands him.

Bramblepaw braced, agony clear in his expression, "All I wanted was a father." His claws sunk into the soil beneath him. He exposed his vulnerability, his truth rose smoothly from his tongue, "I never had one."

It was as though Stormrunner was peering at his reflection in a lake. The way Bramblepaw's words fit his own story was quite scary. Was it possible both these toms met because of their father's mistakes? The gray feline shook his head. He focused back on the trembling apprentice, realizing there was now a place in his heart for Bramblepaw. He inched closer, dropping his head in friendliness. His tail wrapped around the apprentice. "You have me."

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viii | the torture in truth

[image]

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Her eyes tore open suddenly. The visions she had once seen in her dreams all flashed beneath her eyes, vivid scenarios of life and death. And then it all disappeared. She panted heavily, her eyes soaking in the images of her surroundings. The den was quaint and dark; softly protected by midnight. Sharp scents of medicine and various herbs stung her nose like thorns. *The medicine cat den*. Despite the den standing for injured cat's protection, Violetsky found herself suffocating. The walls were slowly closing in on her. Her head began to spin as her heart thrummed in fear. Ever since the torturous hollows of WolfClan's prisons and the narrow tunnels of the rogue camp, Violetsky couldn't let herself rest in a den. She felt confined, *imprisoned,* in dens.

The pale she-cat strode away from the medicine cat den, being welcomed by the tender winds caressing her fur. Long grasses climbed at her legs while she stood to observe the night. The sky was a dark blanket of stars. It stretched like open arms, hugging the land and trees beneath it. Outside, Violetsky could breathe. Her shoulders relaxed without the weight of trouble and she took a seat, studying the peacefulness. There was one thing she promised herself, Wolfstar would never again take away her peace. And she was sure of it.

"Oh, Violetsky," A quiet, surprised voice intercepted her thinking. Her lavender eyes rotated to fix upon a small ginger tom. "I didn't know you were awake. Are you feeling alright?" The tom's eyes were swollen with concern. He looked up and down, examining the

she-cat.

"I'm fine, Rowanpaw. You don't have to worry about me." She whispered, a smile brightening her features. Why did the apprentice seem so puzzled? How long had she been asleep? "Rowanpaw, if you don't mind me asking, how long was I gone for?"

Rowanpaw, ruffling his whiskers, sighed. His face scrunched as he looked back in memory, trying to capture the best calculation. "Uh- I think it was three sun rises..." His voice trailed off as he thought to himself once again. "Yes. Three." He sounded more positive this time.

"Three? That's a long time. I hope Stormrunner is okay." Violetsky could imagine the dark tom's nonstop pacing. He always was so anxious about her, which deep down, she adored. Violetsky imagined what it would be like to go three days without Stormrunner, it would break her heart.

"Actually-" Rowanpaw's voice pitched. "This is the first night he's fallen asleep since the accident. He's doing much better." Rowanpaw's lush eyes sparkled with truthfulness. Violetsky couldn't help but drool over his eyes; *how much he looked like Adderpaw-*

"He hasn't been able to sleep?" The apprentice's words suddenly hit Violetsky. Stormrunner not sleeping sent shivers of unsettlement down her spine. "He must be so exhausted, poor thing."

Rowanpaw shrugged. Last time the apprentice talked with the worried warrior, he was definitely fatigued. He remembered the blue in Stormrunner's single eye was weak with exhaustion; he wasn't eating and he was constantly questioning Violetsky's well-being. "Well, the important thing is he's fine now. And so are you." The chestnut-furred tom smiled brightly, his happiness for his two companions as clear as the color of the stars. But quite slowly, the smile on his muzzle faded, like dawn to the stars. Rowanpaw grew sad. "That night of the accident, I heard you and Stormrunner fighting. I didn't stay because I felt like I was intruding." The apprentice glanced up into the molly's eyes, attempting to read her expressions. She was blank. He proceeded, "What were you arguing about?"

The question burned the air followed by a heavy intensity. It felt like a stone deep in her throat, blocking her words. Violetsky stumbled, "Rowanpaw, we were arguing about-" She froze, knowing the answer would baffle the young tom. Should she lie? The silver she-cat suddenly found herself torn. Perhaps talking to Rowanpaw would ease the pain. "Your brother, Adderpaw."

Now Rowanpaw was the one without words. His eyes widened with faint shock as he wasn't expecting his brother to be the subject of a fallout. Confusion swamped his head, "What? Why?" He had so many questions.

Violetsky senses the hot tears form in the edges of her eyes. She sucked in a hard breath, feeling the painful memories pierce her as if they had claws of their own. "It was so long ago, I-"

"Oh, Violetsky. You know I hate to see you cry." Rowanpaw's big eyes looked into Violetsky's own. He could see them shine with an outline of tears. "Don't tell me if it hurts you to."

"I loved him, Rowanpaw." The words spoke for themselves. The confession was quick and quite shocking. Rowanpaw slowly shook his head, his face curled in confusion. But before saying anything, he let his friend continue. "I loved him so much that when he left, I couldn't love anyone again." Despite the burning of her voice, for once, Violetsky felt like she could actually breathe. The words she had wished to speak for so long, were finally gone. "The whole argument was about how I can't love Stormrunner in the way he wants me to."

Rowanpaw's fell to the swaying grass stroking his legs. He only remembered bits of his brother, before he was snatched away. His brother may have been dead, but the jealously he once felt for his kin was surely alive. Adderpaw was the family's favorite. Adderpaw was everyone's favorite. When you were beside him so was the world.

"Can you-" Violetsky's stammering interrupted Rowanpaw's thinking. "Can you tell me about him?"

Rowanpaw was quite surprised by the she-cat's question. But when

gazing deep into her downcast expression, he felt compelled to talk. The ginger tom nodded, "When Adderpaw was born, it was as though the world became brighter. Everyone instantly fell in love with him. The other families, the kits, the elders, the clan. And for such a young age, he was very clever and he was super charming. I remember being so envious of him." The gray molly's heart sank in her chest. *She didn't know that.* The conversation suddenly switched tones. Rowanpaw was overtaken by a passionate fury. "I hated him. I hated being the shadow following him around all the time. They wouldn't call me Rowanpaw, they would call me Adderpaw's brother." Rowanpaw paused, inhaling as though the memories physically hurt. "When WolfClan attacked, they tried to take him away from me. Just as I was about to defend him, I hesitated. I thought of the world without Adderpaw; I could finally be myself, I wouldn't have to fight for my mother's attention, I wouldn't constantly be compared to him. Violetsky, I-" Tears were now flooding down Rowanpaw's face, staining his features. He looked as though he had been holding this pain for too long. He had been tortured by something.

And Violet knew exactly what it was. She could already hear the words before they appeared from his mouth.

"I let them take Adderpaw."

Violetsky became insane with burning energy. Her blood ran violently. "But- But," She stumbled over the right words. "He called you a hero. He told me you were a hero."

Rowanpaw slowly shook his head, "Only because he forgave me." Wiping his face on his long fur, the apprentice resumed. "I was going insane, Violetsky. I used to have a lot of dreams involving Adderpaw. Ones where he would murder me, others where he would turn the Clan to hate my name. I used to wake up rotting in the guilt he left me with."

Upon hearing this, the hot flush seizing Violetsky's inner self ceased. She couldn't imagine what the young tomcat had felt like going through all of this. "Who have you told?"

Rowanpaw winced at the question. "Just you." Violetsky accepted

the question but remained silent. She sensed Rowanpaw's torture; the number of times he wanted to tell someone what truly happened but was only stopped by his fear.

The two young cats sat still with each other, the subject of an old friend turned bitter once again. Was Adderpaw turning all of Violetsky's friends against her? It couldn't be true. "Do you hate me?" Rowanpaw's quiet mutter entered the air like a loud bang.

Violetsky turned to stare at the young tom. "No." She stated blankly. Her eyes that reflect her every emotion were now firm with nothingness. "Rowanpaw, I don't just like you because you're Adderpaw's brother. You're my friend. There's nothing you could say that would make me hate you."

And that was that. The feline friends relaxed outside the medicine den but were still within the borders of the campsite. They fell into the night sky, pushing away any worries they once held. All remained peaceful that twilight but dawn was soon to come, and with it, bring many more challenges.

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ix | a pondering of passion

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aesthetic made by faithwishes-

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Dawn rose over the trees like a thin blade of grass. The morning was tantalizingly near as the sun looked to be not even an inch over the soil. At the peak of the sun, colors spilled onto the sky very thinly but were evidently present. The atmosphere was cool. A whispering wind whistled lightly, awakening the once resting campsite. Despite the action beginning to stimulate the forest; the squirrels bounding from the trees, the rustling of cat paws in the trench, the sun breaking through the tower-like trees; it was dark.

But the darkness didn't scare him. The large warrior perched on the edge of the pond, listening to the faint ripples in the water fall against the stones. He abided in loneliness, dipping the sharp edges of his claws into the shadowed water, proceeding to cleanse the crusted blood from under his nails. The trickling water was at utmost refreshing; it embraced his aching muscles and soothed down every worry in his mind. It cleared away the stains from a previous incident, making the warrior feel at peace with himself.

He flattened his body along the rocks, resting his head upon the cool stone. Each passing, sleepless night, his eyelids became heavier and heavier. He craved for some sleep. Midnight was followed by one nightmare after another. He couldn't escape the rush of blood and agonizing screams hunting him about his dreams. Though in reality, he pondered how much of it he was really dreaming. He was living the nightmare of his own creation. In his visions, he faced a side of him he could never admit revealing. The side of him that regrets what he has done.

"Wolfstar." His name fell hollowly into the air. It wasn't followed by the usual fiery spit of hatred or serious command of a soldier. No, this time, his name sounded *normal*.

The tom was quick to lift his gaze. His eagerness to see the one who spoke his name so very differently overrode his feelings of exhaustion. When his slimmed, orange eyes laid upon the cat, tension eased off his shoulders. He inhaled some deep breaths, sensing the typical evil spazz in his bones fade. Relaxed, he mumbled, "Smokestar."

Standing at cautious proximity from the occasionally explosive Wolfstar, stood the old ShadowClan leader. Years had passed by between the two, memories beckoned of another time. But all Wolfstar could notice was how much the tom had changed.

Smokestar was once infamous for being the unsafe and forbidding leader of ShadowClan. His appearance used to shout strength. He was layered with large muscles, so powerfully-built he looked as though he were made of iron. Cats used to treat him as if he were a venomous snake, not daring enough to go near him. One look at the leader could send an enemy Clan running for the hills. His prefix suggested his coat color. His fur was somber with shadows and large black stripes glazed his back like a tiger's.

Now everything had changed. He was sited before the WolfClan leader, seeming as though he had shrunk. He was no tiger but a stray cat. All the once throbbing flesh of muscle on his body had dissolved with time. He was starved, every bone on his body sticking through his skin like naked branches on a tree. And his smokey dark fur was outlined in silver regarding his old age. The only way Wolfstar recognized the tom was through his familiar green eyes. They still shone of something courageous.

Speaking every thought that flashed through his head, Wolfstar blurted quite bitterly, "You look awful."

Smokestar slowly neared the ragged rocks on the side of the pond. His lush eyes didn't spare a single glance away from Wolfstar. He gazed intently as if analyzing every piece of the leader. "Something far worse has happened to a friend of mine."

Wolfstar, aware the aged tom was referring to him, scoffed under his breath. There was a history between the two leaders; a friendship even.

Smokestar continued, his voice shifting from its calm state, "As if I should even call you my friend." His tongue grew louder each word as memories of suffering seized his heart. Again, the leader alluded to another time, "You promised me-" But he was rudely interrupted.

"You were never my friend!" Wolfstar was itching with the compulsion to set things straight. With a quieter, but burning hiss, Wolfstar spoke, "You wanted to kill me." The two toms were unaware that they were sounding like squabbling kittens. They were stuck in an argument that held no resolution. It was too late for both of them.

But still, Smokestar pushed. "Because you were a ***monster***!" The insult left his tongue like a lightning bolt. It scared the sky with a loud and threatening bang. The final rage of the storm had struck. There was much hesitation, the intensity of the moment was as thick as clouds. The two toms stood, years of conflict keeping them apart. They stared at each other, hatred black in their eyes. Wolfstar had been called that word many times, he was used to accepting it like it built his ego. But this time was different. Coming from a friend he once looked up to, someone he wanted to fill the paws of, the insult monster *pained* him.

Hurt, Wolfstar frowned in misery. "Why did you come here? Shouldn't you hate me?" Glancing over his shoulder, he could see the reminisce of his old companion. He was like broken glass; shattered but all pieces were still there.

Smokestar persisted in painful silence. The simple truth was, he wanted to hate Wolfstar. He wanted to end his life, drown him in even more insults. But there was one thing stopping him. "I love you too much to hate you." The words were spoken blandly yet held so much passion. "You were like my brother. We would spend every second of the day together on adventures. You would tell me all about your life and I would teach you of the things I learned as a young warrior." Exhaling a deep sigh, Smokestar carried on. "Our friendship feels like a lifetime ago." Stealing a short glance, the ShadowClan leader could see the sadness boiling beneath Wolfstar's expression. He remembered too. "I used to be one of the scariest cats in the forest, don't you remember? No one dared to talk to me. At first, I liked it, it was satisfying to know I was in charge. But then

my life soon got very lonely."

Wolfstar couldn't relate more.

"That was until you fell into my quarters." Smokestar looked back with a chuckle. "You looked at me as if I were a regular tom. You weren't afraid like the others." The brittle tom moved his eyes to his friend's. There, they felt at home. "So I will do the same, Wolfstar. I will always see you as my friend."

The gray WolfClan leader didn't respond. He sat in silence, turning his eyes away from the older leader. The atmosphere around him churned with unpredictableness, he sat in the unknown. Seconds grew to minutes where he didn't move or make a sound. Everything was bolting within him too quickly, there wasn't enough time to comprehend Smokestar's words. But he knew one thing for certain: Smokestar didn't belong here. "Go."

Smokestar's face scrunched. "What?"

"I want you to go." Wolfstar was stricken with impatient longing. His amber eyes were finally alive, not with anger, but with a sense of morality. "I said go."

It was as if Smokestar could hear the words but his mind couldn't connect the command to his body. He knew Wolfstar was merciless; he ruled with an iron claw. Yet, he was telling Smokestar to go...? "I- I don't understand."

"You're free." It was a bare whisper. A small shine of hope. Wolfstar, finally letting down the walls of his pride, was a good tom. But there was a storm of conflict in him. He was the rope in a tug-of-war being dragged from each side to the next. Smokestar could see his old friend trapped in the shadow of a tyrant.

Smokestar didn't dare say much more for the fear Wolfstar would have a sudden change of heart. The old cat skipped over the rocks, easily sliding down the longer pieces of stone. He hurried as best as he could, keeping in mind not to attach any outside attention. He didn't think this moment would ever come. He once accepted his fate was to die in WolfClan, but oftentimes, fate changes.

Wolfstar gazed encouragingly, feeling a strange blaze evoke in his chest. He didn't understand what had got a hold of him; but it felt right. Watching as Smokestar disappeared between the trees, he realized he would have to face his old, resentful self again. And he sensed the instinct to run away from it. Maybe there was hope for Wolfstar after all.

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x | scarred

[image]

aesthetic by tiviant

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Sunlight shattered down and tossed beams of warmth onto the tapering meadows. Like a painting, the pastel colors intertwined with the earth. Blue skies stretched across the empty expanse, giving a facade of peace. There was not a cloud in sight. The fields, uneven in bending towards the skyline, swayed in the gentle winds.

At first laying eyes on him, emotions of a daydream danced within her. They held each other strong in a gaze, almost not believing each other's existence. The freedom of separation was always delightful. Although all she could think: *she was glad he was alive.*

He ran to her. Embarked in excitement and sights lost in her features. They collided under waves of ecstasy, rolling in the soft grass, smiling as their pale furs tickled their backs. "Violetsky," He meowed, his voice soft-spoken. They stopped rolling, taking in every piece of each other's appearances. He smiled again, "I missed you."

Her whiskers fluttered, "I can see that." She teased lovingly, giving the big gray tom a shove with her paw. Returning to her stance while ruffling the loose strands of grass and leaves from her coat, she studied her good companion, Stormrunner. She could perceive what Rowanpaw had mentioned to her; the exhaustion clouding his soul. There was a sadness dripping from his single ocean-blue eye. But now she stood beside him once again, his face was freckled with happiness. "I have so much to tell you." She had questions burning her deep down. Questions of Stormrunner and Wolfstar's relationship, most of them were.

Before the one-eyed warrior could respond, there a was a small voice. "Stormrunner!" Both the two cat's heads turned to focus on a

small ginger and white tom trotting towards them. He was young and had quite an enthusiastic look on his face. "Are we hunting today?" His large, round chocolate eyes poured the word *please.*

Violetsky, not recognizing the growing apprentice, also turned to Stormrunner. "Who's this?"

Stormrunner, seeming sort of guilty, shrugged slowly. "I made a friend." He chuckled, his eyes darting between the apprentice and Violetsky. "A son, even." His suggestion sent the young tomcat wriggling, butterflies devouring his stomach.

"A son?" Violetsky found herself befuddled. *How much had she missed?*

"I'm Bramblepaw!" The patched tom croaked from beside the she-cat, wagging his tail vigorously. He examined Violetsky closely, squinting as he looked into her eyes. "Are you my mother?"

Violetsky was taken aback by a hint of surprise. Her ears spurred as though she had heard the young apprentice incorrectly. She then felt a nudge by Stormrunner, urging her to say 'yes.' He bounced his head while giving her eager eyes. "Yes." She answered quickly. "Yes I am. I'm Violetsky."

Bramblepaw didn't say anything else before he crashed into Violetsky. He embraced her tightly, breathing in her summery scent. Violetsky wasn't sure how to react although she could feel Stormrunner's cocky smile burning through her skin.

"Okay, Bramblepaw." Stormrunner chimed in, giving his adoptive son a meager bump. "I'll catch up with you later." And with that, the multi-colored tom scurried away, bright in feeling loved. Stormrunner couldn't help but snicker at the sight of the apprentice, hopping and bouncing like a happy rabbit. "Are you okay?" His attention then turned to Violetsky, who didn't seem as enthusiastic about having a son as he did.

"Yeah," Her response seemed jarred with lies. "I just need to have a serious conversation with you. I don't think we should be wasting our time playing with kittens." Every word she spoke was edged like

a thorn. The truth was, Violetsky wasn't keen on the idea of having to take care of an adoptive son. She was too worried about Wolfstar to think about having a family.

"Oh," Stormrunner secretly hated how his gray molly was always so somber. She never had any liveliness to her; she was always so determined on finding peace that she was creating storms in other realms. "Then talk to me." Stormrunner wanted to have a family. Be a father of kits and live happily ever after. *Maybe Violetsky wasn't the right one-*

"I want you to tell me the truth." Violetsky brushed the soothing grasses with her paw, finding a comfortable spot to relax in while she chatted. Stormrunner joined her, sitting conveniently beside her. "I'm supposed to love you. And you can't have love without trust."

Stormrunner, hesitantly flicking his ears, agreed. "Okay." Though, he was nervous about what the she-cat was preparing to ask. *Hadn't Violetsky trusted him before?*

"Where did you get your scars?" The inquiry didn't nuzzle the air tenderly. It stung of past memories.

Stormrunner didn't have the guts to say simply. He lost his breath in his throat. "I-" He stumbled, becoming hot with the words he was afraid to speak. The stories with his father had been bottled for so long, he was starting to forget about them. "It was my father. He ordered his soldiers to scratch me as punishment for not obeying his orders." He could still hear himself shouting, living in the rebellious moments: *'I was never your son!'*

Violetsky, inhaling as she painting the picture in her head, pressed her nose against the grizzled tom's shoulder. "I'm sorry Stormrunner. I didn't realize-"

"No, I'm sorry!" Stormrunner awakened with faint regret. He pulled away from Violetsky, sniffling. "I'm sorry I lied to you." The tom that once couldn't speak was now saying everything too quickly. He was lifting a weight from his chest that had been there for moons, maybe a year even. "I didn't want you to think I was some monster

following the path of my father. I was afraid you'd hate me." Looking closely into Violetsky's magnificent eyes, Stormrunner let the truth lay to rest. All he wanted was for her to love him. So he had to open his soul. "He used to torture me. Every day he was howling, *'Work harder Stormrunner. Harder! No, you're not good enough Stormrunner.'* I needed an escape." His familiar face was screened in a film of sorrow. His eye shimmered, "That's when I ran into you."

Violetsky, lost in a moment of paradise, muttered, "Stormrunner I-"

"Alright lovebirds," A harsh voice intercepted her. Both Stormrunner and Violetsky turned around to see a familiar tortoiseshell tom standing not-so-politely behind them. His face was wrinkled with mockery, however, there was something melancholy about him. "Echostar would like to see you."

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xi | all is settled

[image]

aesthetic by afterstorms

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A stimulating sensation flooded Wolfstar's veins. All of his sorrowed emotions faded as a wicked plan spun in his head. "When did you become so intelligent, Molesnake? Well done." He praised his faithful protector. Although, faithful may have been the wrong word to describe the brown warrior. And little did Wolfstar know, Molesnake wore his disloyalty like a cruel second skin...

At heeding the tortoiseshell's grave suggestion, the two cats couldn't help but frown in wonder. They held each other in a gaze, questions like birds flapping through their minds. Violetsky felt the strong compulsion of nerves ripple through her blood as she wondered whether Echostar was frustrated with them.

Stormrunner turned his single blue eye back to face Falconrain, "Tell her we'll be there in a minute." The large tom truly didn't want to bury away everything he was promised he would speak. He wanted to keep the conversation running with Violetsky, then maybe his past would stop haunting his dreams.

Falconrain lashed his tail indifferently, "No," His voice boomed quite strictly. "She needs you now." His face flushed with an uncivilized emotion, however, Violetsky couldn't place her claw on it.

She sighed deeply, letting go of finally having the chance to speak with her mate. "If not even Echostar can wait, it must be important. Let's go." She gave a soft, encouraging nudge to Stormrunner's shoulder. Almost as if she was saying their conversation wasn't completely over.

When the two cats stood, the mottled tom directed the way through the large campground. His lean body would easily slink through the swaying grasses, his long legs outstretching into wide paces. Violetsky and Stormrunner dropped falteringly behind, Falconrain's steps were much quicker than theirs.

The small group then neared the leader's den, which looked similar to a snake's burrow underground. It was built intelligently, so any cat overlooking the surface of the moores would have no idea the den existed. The cave-like den drew deep into the ground, remainders of roots strewn upon the ground. Violetsky, eyes wide with jolting fear, couldn't help but twitch with flashbacks of the rogues she and Stormrunner had encountered on their journey. She no longer enjoyed traveling into such tight spaces.

Long, twisting vines fenced the entrance of the den and strangely enough, Falconrain paused before pushing his way in. He whirled around, facing Violetsky. He lowered his jaws to her ears, a clear height-difference between the two felines. "Don't say anything you'd regret." He warned in a low volume, glancing around grudgingly.

The words seemed to seep through her skin but she couldn't place her means on it. But before she could question the tom, he was already nosing his way past the vines and disappearing into the den.

Violetsky was timid to follow, not sure if she was ready to accept what would confront her behind the vines. However, her curiosity moved her paws for her, leading the way into the den.

The den opened to a much wider expanse than the she-cat had expected. She wondered how much time WindClan must have spent digging the tunnels, then her stomach churned sickly with another thought. How many cats had died in these tunnels? Realizing her head was entwined with too many worries, she let her eyes wander. Sitting rather calmy, collected in a circle on the edges of the den, was a small gathering of cats: Heathersong, who was Echostar's first apprentice, Redhare, WindClan's deputy, Echostar, Falconrain, and-

Molesnake?

She almost didn't believe it. He was the fifth figure, nestled closely beside WindClan's leader, his reverent emerald eyes laying upon the two incomers. Violetsky could feel the fur raise off her back, swarming into a thorny clump. But she didn't feel any aggressive nature towards the tom, simply shock.

Stormrunner, on the other hand, didn't follow Violetsky's relaxed essence. His teeth bore as though he was to devour the tom. Snarling, he roared, "What are you doing here?" In this moment, Stormrunner was a sweeping violence with sharp claws. Hatred was like a lantern in his eye.

Redhare, the short but rather Herculean tom, shoved his way before Molesnake, growling lowly at Stormrunner. "He's with us!" He looked like a mentor scolding their young apprentice as a result of their stupidity. At the disbelief swollen in the two cat's eyes, he repeated himself, "He's with us."

"That doesn't make any sense." Stormrunner's morose voice sounded off the walls of the den. "He's no rebel!" The bitterness surfacing each word Stormrunner spoke made the tension rise as thick as clouds.

Echostar, obviously out of patience for the young tom, bowed her head. "Stormrunner, Violetsky, please take a seat." Out of the exhaustion bright in her orange eyes, both the cats complied with her command. "I'll explain everything," Echostar meowed ensuring there many questions would be answered. But before she did, she stared at Stormrunner, a facade of confusion clouding her eyes. "Stormrunner, how do you know this tom? What is he to you?"

The ashen-toned tom thought of the many terms to describe Molesnake; *mentor, father-like figure, friend.* But his heart ached, full of the bad memories Molesnake had trapped him in. He didn't deserve any of Stormrunner's recognition. "An enemy." Stormrunner's hiss was too much somber. He was so serious, he even surprised Violetsky.

The WindClan leader flinched, never expecting her sweet Stormrunner to be so foul-mouthed. There was suspicion tracing the corners of her eyes, and Violetsky could see the leader was tempted

to ask further.

"In all due respect, Echostar," Heathersong, the sandy furred she-cat voiced from the back, "Why are we here? And why only so few of us?"

Echostar seemed at sea, lost amongst the waves of what she wanted to speak. "I have gathered my most trustworthy of warriors to reveal a truth of which I should've shared long ago. I thought it would be easier to tell you first before the entire Clan." She inhaled then exhaled heavy breaths, her eyes falling to the figure of Molesnake beside her.

But before Echostar could finish her statement, Molesnake piped in for her. "Echostar is my mother." He glanced over at Falconrain, shooting him a sharp glimpse, "My *real* mother."

As the multi-colored tom had told Violetsky, *don't say anything you'd regret*, he bit back his tongue as well as claws. There was a dangerous flash in his eyes, one could start fires with a look like his. Violetsky, studying the battle-broken tom, felt a wave of sympathy for him. She was sorry; she knew what it was like to have no one. What it was like to be alone and lost in a war. She figured the tom was worried over the fact of Molesnake's return. Now that Echostar had her son back, *did she really need to love Falconrain any longer?*

But Stormrunner was obviously thinking about many other things, excluding Falconrain. "What?" His face wrinkled with confusion. "Then why were you working for Wolfstar?"

Despite the question being directed towards Molesnake, Echostar responded, "It's a long story," Her expression drooped sadly, she looked like a flower wilting. "But all that matters is that he's home now. Right where he belongs."

Deep down, at some point in her guts, Violetsky was happy to have Molesnake join the Rebellion. He must've received boundless information against Wolfstar, lists upon lists on ways to destroy him. Maybe having him back wasn't such a terrible thing after all.

There was a hollow silence in the air however with so many

lingering emotions, bouncing from every cat's pelt, Violetsky couldn't think straight. She wanted to curl back into her nest and forget this gathering ever occurred.

Then, and quite briskly, Echostar turned to Stormrunner. Her bright orange eyes sank into his features, and for a moment, Violetsky saw something familiar about her. Violetsky frowned as though she were placing together a puzzle. That's when clear, but dark words resounded in her mind. '*I'm everything you can't control.'* It clicked. For only a prompt glimpse, Echostar looked very alike to Wolfstar. Violetsky then thought was being dragged by her imagination. *It couldn't be-*

"Stormrunner," The WindClan leader affirmed. "Please stay after. I need to have a word." The gray tom agreed reluctantly. He couldn't possibly imagine what Echostar's "word" would be about but he was too honeyed to deny. Echostar dipped her head in a dignified manner. "All is settled then. Meeting dismissed."

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xii | so was i

[image]

aesthetic made by faded-fawns

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There was silence at first. Not a single whisp in the air fluttered by. There were no words. Like a forest untouched by life, it was quiet. The two cats rested alone in the den, facing one another. They were waiting for something; a spark of conversation, a flash of emotion in the eye. The large gray tom remained hesitant, hoping his company would be the first to speak.

The elderly ruler ruffled her long, lackluster fur. It was swept clean, similar to how snow looks when it first falls to the ground. Her amber eyes then bore like forest fires into the tom's only blue one. She studied him deeply. She looked at him as though there was something worth looking at. Her maple-dripping eyes traced over each blemish written on the tom's appearance; she followed each scar that ran across his face, each bruise entwined with his skin. She then, finally, spoke, "I knew there was something familiar about you. I knew it from the moment you came."

Stormrunner flicked his ears forward, relieved the headache of silence was gone.

Echostar cleared her throat, her mouth parting slightly as she began to say more, "This wasn't your idea?" She switched the subject. But when she noticed a flash of confusion stain Stormrunner's face, she added, "It wasn't your idea to join another Clan."

Again, not speaking, Stormrunner reluctantly shook his head. Echostar was right. It wasn't his idea. *It was Violetsky's.*

"I know you." The zinc-toned molly hushed, her gentle breath rattling her whiskers. She stilted forward to gaze at the tom before her, her amber eyes crisscrossing over all of his open emotions. "I

see you. You want to be free."

The accuracy of the she-cat's mellowing made Stormrunner question how much she did know concerning him. Stormrunner didn't doubt the she-cat's intelligence but wondered how she could easily grasp each secret from his soul. Replying to her previous statement, Stormrunner nodded solemnly. He did want to be free. He hated to be tied down by labels; he hated to become something he wasn't.

"You're in pain." *Now Stormrunner felt the she-cat was stepping too far.* He eyed her deploringly, wishing the subject of conversation would change from him. But Echostar continued. She leaned in closer, her orange eyes swollen with apologetic feelings. She touched the base of her paws to the tom's shoulder. "I used to know Wolfstar too."

What? Stormrunner couldn't believe his ears. For a second, he dreamed Echostar was saying such. He lifted his head higher, a concentrated frown crinkling along his browline. He could feel his heart thrum in his chest like a pair of hummingbird wings.

And, as if reading his mind, Echostar answered, "Stormrunner, I'm his sister."

The concept seemed so unrealistic, Stormrunner didn't want to believe her. He twisted his head, feeling his sharpened claws drill into the soil. It's not true! All the right words were trapped in his parched throat. Please, don't let it be true. But when Stormrunner glimpsed back up again, all he could see was his father in Echostar's amber eyes. Wolfstar was like a shadow following him; would Stormrunner ever escape his torture? His stomach churned violently, he felt sick.

"We're related-" He shivered, trying to tell himself to accept the truth.

"We are." Every word Echostar spoke was sour in an attempt to comfort. She flicked her tail, "I understand what it's like to feel alone." *But she didn't,* Stormrunner thought bitterly. *Echostar knew nothing of Stormrunner.* "I'm here for you."

"No." The coal-colored tom bellowed painfully. He didn't need her

help, he was doing just fine before. Stormrunner kept his eyes on his paws, feeling himself crumbled inside. After all this time of believing he was abandoned, he wasn't. He didn't want to face Echostar. "I don't need you." Stormrunner spat, "Hell, I don't even know you are."

Seeing as the young tom came to life with blindsided anger only brought flashbacks to Echostar's mind. She stumbled over her words, fear seizing her heart with cold claws. "I'm only trying to help-" She sucked in a sharp breath, the tips of her hairs covered in frost.

Stormrunner suddenly stopped, realizing he was only paralleling his father. He blinked a few times, praying he was imagining it all. There was a hollow silence. Stomrunner wondered if he would ever heal this rift he created.

Just at the same time, a familiar tortoiseshell tom burst through the entrance of the den. He strode powerfully, holding a similar presence that a king would. However, his behavior shone darkly.

Being followed a little less intrusively, was Stormrunner's dear friend, Violetsky. She seemed embarrassed to be intercepting so out-of-the-sudden, yet also a little proud to be following Falconrain's footsteps. The small she-cat trotted to Stormrunner's side, nuzzling his shoulder comfortingly.

Stormrunner tried to speak, "She's-" But Violetsky looked as though she already knew.

The lavender-eyed she-cat somberly ducked her head, whispering, "I overheard." She coiled into the muscular tom, her nervousness easing once she was closer to him. "I'm sorry."

The two cat's attention was then panned away at the sight of frightened Echostar, cowering away from her son. "F-Falconrain?" The alabaster leader gulped down a shaky breath as she stared at the tortoiseshell.

"Mother," Falconrain acknowledged quite obnoxiously, the green in his eyes flared with fury. "I need to talk to you."

Echostar, gaining back her strict posture, swung her head somberly. "Now is not the right time, Falconrain." Her eyes darted back and forth between Stormrunner and Falconrain. She then shot a dangerous scowl at her adopted son, disapproval coating her face.

"Then when is the right time?" The tom suddenly erupted. He jolted as if to hold himself back from doing anything he would regret. His fur spiked as an avalanche of anger suffocated him. "You never have time for me!" He let out an earsplitting shout, each thunderous word bounding from the wall.

"What is this about?" Echostar asked seriously, trying her best to hide her first, horrified response.

Falconrain's acidic eyes sparkled, "I'm here for the good of the Clan, mother." He paused to find the right words. "You can't keep Molesnake in the Rebellion. He's a threat to us."

Violetsky and Stormrunner, along with Echostar, all seemed shocked at Falconrain's suggestion. Stormrunner studied the ferocious warrior, taking in to account the lavish frenzy in his eyes. *What did Falconrain really want?* Stormrunner questioned himself, his thoughts forming a storm in his head. *Maybe it was a cry for help.*

Echostar spun with dizziness. Everything was happening too fast, her family was falling apart. Her eyesight blurred and she couldn't think straight. "What do you want me to do?" Was all she could bring her mind to ask. The dark colors of her adopted son blotted her eyesight like splashes of spilled paint.

A wicked smile encompassed Falconrain's face, "Exile him! Banish him!" It was as though he already had a list planned out. "Kill him, for all I care! I just want him gone." He had turned so cruel and cold. If Falconrain looked at his reflection in a pond, he wouldn't recognize himself under the ripples of darkness he was consumed in. *Is that the price you pay for pain?*

"Falconrain!" Echostar's harsh call sliced through the tense air. "I can't do such a thing. Molesnake belongs in WindClan." The white ruler was whirled in confusion about why her tom would confess such an evil thing. She didn't understand Falconrain's suffering. She

didn't understand her son was crying for help. Echostar only noticed what she thought was important. "He's my son."

"So was I." He was Echostar's son once, someone she loved and someone she would give the world to. But now, since Molesnake had returned, Falconrain was *nothing*. The dappled tom was coaxed in layers of suffering. He no longer felt god-like, instead, a monster of jealousy had poisoned his blood. Falconrain turned on his claws, and without a final word, he disappeared.

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xiii | forest of snakes

[image]

aesthetic made by faithwishes-

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It was another passing day. The great bright sun fell below the horizon once again, giving way the expanse of stars above. While cats sat around, their eyes bathing the sight before them, all he could think was that it was the same old sunset. *It was his same old life.*

Even though it occurred weeks ago, Stormrunner couldn't fully digest what Echostar had told him. They were kin. But does kinship necessarily mean friendship? Every time Stormrunner met her eyes or passed her in the camp, there was not an exchange of words between them. There were no expressions of emotions or even a hello. Meanwhile, Violetsky was loving in her life in the old WindClan territory. She had gained an abundance of friends who were all against one thing; Wolfstar. The gray tom always reluctant to join their parade as Violetsky's new friends held a vendetta against him; *he was Wolfstar's son*. Stormrunner had never felt more alone in his life.

"Stormrunner," The low warble of his name intercepted his thoughts. He twisted his head to see the familiar tattered pelt of Falconrain. He revealed himself from behind the warrior's den, each graceful step seeming as though he was walking on thin ice. "May I have a word?"

The silver tom pricked his ears, quite surprised to see Falconrain. The soldier had disappeared for a few nights, not that anyone else cared to notice. Stormrunner cleared his throat suddenly. Out of the sickly sweetness in his heart, he agreed, "Of course." He followed the nimble-footed tom back behind the den.

The long grasses cloaked over Stormrunner's shoulders, the ends of

the lush blades tickling the warrior's spine. Falconrain slinked easily through the cluster, as though he were a snake camouflaged in the undergrowth. Stormrunner's mind whirled, why was Falconrain acting so secretive? What did he want to address?

The scarred warrior came to a soon stop, his glass-like, fragile green eyes locked into Stormrunner's. "Listen to me," A boorish whisper seethed from his tongue. "You tell another soul of this conversation and you'll be running for the winds." Falconrain's threat was like poison seeping into skin. His reptile-like eyes flashed dangerously.

Stormrunner was at a loss of breath. It was as though he had swallowed a stone and it was stuck heavily on his chest. Then realizing Falconrain was waiting for some kind of response, he nodded his head quickly.

"I hate snakes," The tortoiseshell tom began with a sharp inhale, "They're dangerous, deceptive, venomous. They're the sort of thing you strive to keep away from your loved ones." Falconrain swiftly glanced to his left and right, checking for one last time to see that the two toms were alone. "Us warriors," His voice deepened, "We kill snakes before they kill others."

Stormrunner, clearly out of patience, hissed, "Why are you telling me this?" His pelt bristled sharply, each strand of his har spiking with sourness.

Falconrain lowered his head, his whiskers so close to Stormrunner, it was almost as if they would intertwine. "I demand you kill Molesnake." The words left a feverish chill to dance in the atmosphere.

The gray tom's mouth hung open in despair. Was Falconrain serious? Every emotion in Falconrain's facial expression screamed with somberness. The tom was broken beyond repair, he was gaining his own satisfactory vengeance through Stormrunner's weaknesses. However, Stormrunner didn't want anything to do with Molesnake. "Why me?" He stammered, "I couldn't do such a thing."

"Because," The exception rolled off his tongue. "I'm too busy fighting my own battles." As Falconrain explained, gardens of sorrow

sprouted in his eyes. He had been fighting for too long. "Besides, you're the son of a villain." Falconrain looked Stormrunner up and down, not a hint of sympathy in him. "It's expected of you."

Stormrunner's heart shattered in his chest where to every shard pierced right through his skin. After a long time of running to escape his bloodline, he found he would never escape. Death would be his only way out. Anger surged like a storm beneath his claws. I'm not my father, he roared to himself. His sanity tossed upside down, now all he could feel, conquering his blood, was the energy to kill. "No, Falconrain." He bellowed quite boldly. Stormrunner knew that he was not a killer.

Stormrunner already knew Falconrain was unpredictable. He was a brewing storm disguised in colored fur. Before Stormrunner could even witness the attack, there was a watery sting above his eyes. Falconrain's razor-shaped claws sunk into Stormrunner's hide, drawing a thin line of blood that dribbled onto his face. Stormrunner stumbled back, too baffled to intelligently react.

"If you don't do as I say," Falconrain mumbled, his claws stained with thick plasma. "You can expect a painful death." The tortoiseshell tom retracted his claws, giving Stormrunner a harsh shove. Before leaving completely, the tom turned back. His jewel-like eyes studied Stormrunner cruelly as if he were facing a villain. "Trust me, son," Falconrain spoke quietly, "We don't need any more snakes in this forest."

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xiv | dna

[image]

aesthetic made by WarriorCatLover231

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The darkness of the night was like an illness seeping through every inch of his skin. He stood, concealed in the shadows, above an innocent, sleeping soul. He rocked uneasily. His mind was a grave ocean, tossing and turning with the conflict of good and bad. Falconrain's words dictated his head: "*You're the son of a villain. It's expected of you.*" He flinched at the imaginary claws grinding into his throat, peeling the breath from his lungs. His death rested on the fate of his decision. *Should he kill Molesnake?*

Stormrunner was arguing with himself. A side of him was ravenous for blood, he was whispering, *'Kill him. Kill him now.'* But every coin has two sides. He also wanted to scream for help. He was drowning and needed a lifeboat.

Stormrunner, with a heavy sigh, studied the sound asleep appearance of his mentor. *Was this Molesnake's destiny? Was this his destiny?* The gray-toned tom slowly raised his brilliant claws, the anticipation building within his bones. He gulped down a shivering breath, forcing every bit of his focus into the attack. Suddenly and with no agony, Stormrunner thrashed down his violent claws-

But he was no killer. Stormrunner hurled himself from the den, his movements as quick as flashes of lights. He was a gray blur, racing under the midnight expanse. His heart thundered in his chest like a raging storm. All he wanted was to run away. His body, mind, and soul all ached for freedom, he *needed* to run. However, he wasn't running away from Molesnake or Falconrain. Instead, he was running from himself.

Stormrunner hurried through the long grasses, the crashing wind shoving him onward. The bottom of his paws throbbed as he

plowed through the greenery. He wasn't thinking of the family and friends he was leaving behind, he was only relieved he was finally escaping. Stormrunner flew further, over the tapering hills and out through the heather tunnel which welcomed one into WindClan.

At last, he thought he was *free*. But he thought too quickly. There was still a shackle chaining him down. He was still a prisoner to someone

"Stormrunner?" He lifted his chin, his Neptune eye touching into a pair of lavender ones. The she-cat's voice was laced in honey, however, she was shocked to see the tom in such a rush. "What are you doing?"

He found he couldn't answer her question. The truth stung so badly to admit. His throat closed, heaviness blocking his words. All he could do was stare blankly, waiting for her to speak again.

Violetsky circled the tom, a frown crinkling her gaze. She saw the sweat clinging to his sides, his heavy breath ruffling his long whiskers. *He was running.* "Are you leaving?"

Stormrunner still had no answer. "I- I," He stumbled distressingly. Even though he didn't fully admit he was leaving, by reading the embarrassment hot on his face, Violetsky could place the words in his mouth.

A flash of sorrow shattered her moonlight eyes. "What? Why?" Too many questions spurred onto her lips. "I don't understand." All she could think at this very moment was of Wolfstar's warning. He told her of this moment.

"Violetsky, I-" His words tripped over in guilt. Stormrunner exhaled, avoiding the she-cat's heavy optics. "I'm no good here." He exhaled, his panting sides slowing as he calmed his breathing. "You have to let me run." It was a bare whisper, a shiver through the midnight sky.

"No." She refused. Tears rested on the edges of her eyelids, threatening to spill over. "There's nowhere to hide, Stormrunner!" Violetsky's melancholy was shifting into an emotion much stronger;

anger. She was outraged at Stormrunner, Wolfstar, and mostly herself. "You cannot escape your DNA!"

Stormrunner turned his back to the crying she-cat. He couldn't bear to face her, leaving was unpleasant enough. But he knew deep down in his frosted heart, she was right. He had to tell her the truth. "I'm scared," He breathed. "That once you get rid of my father, you'll get rid of me too."

Violetsky shook her vigorously. Her lower lip twitched as sadness overtook her soul. She tried to convince Stormrunner that wasn't true and maybe he was just lost "You're confused-"

"I'm not!" Stormrunner shouted, his single blue eye whisking around to face Violetsky. "You hate me." After time and time again of Stormrunner trying to earn Violetsky's heart, she only pushed him away.

"No Stormrunner, you're not listening." Violetsky gripped her paw to his shoulder, trying to pull him closer to her. But the silver tom yanked cruelly away from her embrace, a sour expression cast on his front. She lamented, terrified of suffering without him. "I love you."

However, those three forced words weren't enough to make him stay. The cloudy-colored tom wasn't going to fall into her grave of lies again. Stormrunner shook his head, moving a few paw steps forward. But Violetsky spoke again,

"Where on earth are you going to go?"

The question burned the air like a forest fire. Stormrunner's body buzzed in hot goosebumps. Smoke infiltrated through his nostrils, he knew Violetsky would despise his answer. "My father," He didn't look back. He could feel Violetsky's hatred radiating like electricty from her bones. "Around him, I'm not a villain."

This was it. Their final moments together. "Goodbye," He sputtered painfully. Then Stormrunner moved on. He galloped away from one holding him back, over and above the rising meadows. He was no longer a prisoner. He trekked deep into the violet strands of heather

until his very last hair disappeared.

Violetsky stood, rotting in despair, as she watched Stormrunner leave. She was without words, there was nothing to be said. Stormrunner *betrayed* her. He ran to go back to his father, his dictator, like a brainwashed soldier would.

"Violetsky!" A pitiful, little mew intercepted her silent onslaught. Her eyes turned to fall upon the small figure of Bramblepaw, her adopted son. His dark eyes were wide with agony as though he had been sliced mercilessly through the stomach. They held strong eye contact, speaking only through their eyes. And Bramblepaw's pain said *everything*. Watching his second family fall apart was like revisiting Hell. He suddenly collasped, his body sounding a thump as it fell beneath the swaying grasses.

"Bramblepaw!"

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xv | a brother's battle

[image]

aesthetic made by shadethemask

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"Help! Somebody help me!" Her cries resounded distinctly over the tapering hills. The aching she-cat trudged through the long grasses, the lifeless apprentice was strewn along on her shoulders. Each slow, nearing paw step caused her muscles to burn feverishly. Her heavy breathing parched her tongue as she was dragged by exhaustion. But Violetsky gritted her teeth. She was a soldier and so she kept marching onward.

Flashes of panicked eyes colored the dark atmosphere. Blues, greens, and ambers all poked holes of vibrance through the endless midnight. With the growing sense of danger forthcoming, the cat's pelts bristled into bushes of fur. Every face held a similar expression of worry. Suddenly, Violetsky emerged from the shadows, carrying Bramblepaw on her back. Gasps of horror flooded the camp, *was Bramblepaw dead?* Violetsky wasn't even an inch inside the camp when warriors rushed to her side, easing the apprentice from her shoulders.

The silver she-cat watched, without a voice, as they hurried elsewhere with Bramblepaw. She simply stood, hearing each brutal thud of her heart. Sickness churned in her stomach. She wanted to stay beside her son, to ensure he would be okay. *It was easy to die from a broken heart.*

"Violetsky," The summoner of her name spoke powerfully. "What happened?" It was Falconrain speaking, his multi-colored pelt gleaming under the brilliant stars. He grew close to the she-cat, the warmth from his breath sinking into her coat.

"Silence!" Before Violetsky could share a word with her friend, a loud demand rocketed through the Clan grounds. Every cat turned

their pointed ears, a few being seized by frightened goosebumps. Molesnake appeared from on top of the leader's rock, squaring his harsh stance. His poisonous, glaring eyes held Falconrain paralyzed beneath them. His unsheathed claws *screeched* against the stone. "Violetsky, would you mind telling us what happened?"

The gray molly flicked her tail, feeling pressured under everyone's eyes. It was as though she was being harried into the dirt; her breath fell short, sweat outlined her appearance. She gulped,

"I-" Her stomach then jolted violently. If telling them the truth about what happened, would the WindClan cats frame Stormrunner as a villain? "Stormrunner approached me. He looked devastated. He told me he was running away to meet-" Violetsky abruptly stopped speaking. She could feel her face boiling with embarrassment, tears coated her eyes with a glossy shine.

"To where?" A black-furred tom called out.

Violetsky locked her eyes with Molesnake. She gazed at the brown tom gravely, feeling the guilt rot in her heart. "To Wolfstar." Another wave of shuddering gasps throttled through the field. The silence was swiftly broken. Aloud, cats fell into a frenzy, shouting:

"He's a traitor!"

"We should have never have trusted him!"

Violetsky was struck with agony by the outcries. She wanted to sink beneath the earth, cower away from this problem she knew she had started. Her lips then parted slightly. Violetsky needed to assert Stormrunner's innocence; he didn't attack Bramblepaw. "Bramblepaw collapsed at hearing Stormrunner's departure." The silvery she-cat had regained everyone's attention once again. "He was heartbroken." Violetsky centered her thinking around the young warrior. She knew his loss of consciousness was linked to the fact that he was losing another family. Bramblepaw loved Stormrunner like the father he never had.

"It isn't your fault," Molesnake announced, dipping his head in respect. However, his voice didn't sound comforting. His tongue

was warlike; stained in demand and callousness. Molesnake brushed back his long, creamy brown hairs. His focus slowly shifted to his adopted brother, Falconrain. "It's his."

WindClan thrummed with shock. As if hearing Stormrunner's betrayal wasn't challenging enough, Molesnake had brought to light another problem. Cat's eyes spun to fix upon the tortoiseshell tom. Everyone was waiting for a response from the soldier.

Yet, Falconrain said nothing. He lifted his heavy gaze and his eyes slanted into an elliptic shape. His claws crunched at the ground with acidic anger. A psychotic emotion smeared in his eyes as he looked at his brother. Although Falconrain didn't say a word, his eyes told the complete truth.

"Molesnake!" An angry mother's cry shattered the tension. Echostar, appearing from her den, gazed towards the sky to level with her son's eyes. She scolded her son, "Stop this right now." She ordered sincerely in a hushed tone.

"I can't mother," Molesnake flattened his ears. "You have brought a monster into our home and I believe the whole Clan should know." The tom's venom infected those through his words. A scheme unfolded in his eyes. "You should have left him on the side of the road."

Now Falconrain was bruised with a look of hatred. His snarled wordlessly, bloodthirsty energy controlling his head. His claws gleamed like knives in the pale twilight as he flexed hungrily.

Violetsky watched nervously. Chaos unfolded like a storm billowing through the trees. The atmosphere had grown dangerous; the two toms were blindsided by each other's wrongdoing. It was a battle no one would win. "Stop!" The she-cat wailed. One family had already fallen to pieces tonight, she didn't want to watch another fall. "Please, stop!" She cried loudly, facing Molesnake with bare confidence.

"Silence." The brown-furred tom hissed cruelly. "Falconrain is not the loyal soldier you think he is. I overheard him threatening Stormrunner to kill me." Molesnake screened over his Clan, closely

watching their grimaces. "It gets even worse. If Stormunner didn't oblige, he would be facing death."

Violetsky's lower lip quivered in sorrow. Everything Molesnake said she wanted to think of as lie. But deep down in her ruined heart, she knew the tom wasn't lying. She glanced over her shoulder to look at the tattered tom and little would she have guessed, he was looking back. Violetsky could feel her face scrunch in sadness. Yet, Falconrain did nothing.

Molesnake slithered down from the great rock gracefully. He began to pace a wide circle around his brother. "I'm not surprised Stormrunner ran away." He growled, "Anyone would be afraid of this road-kill."

Falconrain's sanity sliced into a thousand pieces. Without thinking, the tortoiseshell warrior charged at his brother. He roared violently, the destructive indulgence in his eyes could battle an entire army. The two toms fell into a vicious brawl, hissing and screeching from the blood they were drawing.

Falconrain swung his sharpened claws, knocking Molesnake brutally in the mouth. Blood sprayed from the tom's jaws, a front fang popping from his mouth. Molesnake buckled in pain, the taste of blood was similar to a toxin. He glowered at his brother, an evil glaze coating his green eyes. Molesnake, in a counter-attack, threw himself at Falconrain. His nails drove into the tortoiseshell's head, a thin line of brightly-colored plasma dribbled down into his face. Falconrain was temporarily blinded, allowing Molesnake to add another blow to the stomach.

Echostar tried to entwine between her sons, shouting at them to stop. Violetsky couldn't hear a single thing; she became trapped within a trance. Everything slowed for her; Falconrain hurting his brother, Echostar's pleading, the Clan cats assembled for the fight. It was all falling apart because of the storm she brought in.

Finally, Redhare and a few of the other strong WindClan toms put themselves between the battle. The two brothers stood far apart, a gap of hate spilling between them. Blood marked their appearances, both of the toms were spoiled with wounds. The fighting was over,

however, there was still no peace. There was a dark night clouding above Violetsky and her companions, one where the subsequent morning would be depressing. Echostar, the proud empire that stood still amidst the conflict, collapsed. Like Violetsky mentioned before; *it was easy to die from heartbreak.*

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xvi | welcome home

[image]

aesthetic made by shadethemask

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The sun slowly rose above the horizon. Light danced upon the forest, a golden glow tickling the tops of the trees. The sky was drawn alive, its pale colors crumbled down to meet the ground. Midnight's darkness was slowly chased away and the stars were bathed in the sky. Now that he could finally see clearly, he crept through the undergrowth much quicker. The stems of plants and bushes yielded their way as the tom glided through. There wasn't a hint of reluctance in his head; he simply kept moving.

With each step, he neared his destiny. He felt like a monarch who had been lost on a journey and was finally returning to his kingdom. However, he was different. While on his journey, he didn't feel lost. Memories, like flashes of dying lights, throttled his mind. He remembered Violetsky's warmth in her words and the stories he showered in with Bramblepaw; Stormrunner was never lost if they were beside him.

But it was too late to turn back now. Stormrunner walked proudly, the forest paradise shifting into a rocky arena. He knew this place all too well, similar to salt in the see, it would never leave his bones.

As the gray-furred warrior stepped onward, a line of shadows appeared in his vision. He squinted his single eye, hundreds of cat silhouettes lined shoulder to shoulder. There were so many of them. Stormrunner, feeling icy chills spark down his spine, continued forth. And what he saw was true. Wolfstar's soldiers were arranged in a long row down the narrow path which would lead him to his father. The soldiers were painted with seriousness, when Stormrunner stepped past them not even their eyes twitched. It was some sort of sick welcoming. *But how did he know?* Stormrunner

wondered. *How did his father know of his return?*

"My son," Spoke that voice. That voice that chased him like helpless prey in nightmares. That voice which prickled through his skin like thorns. There the owner of the voice stood, dignity sitting like a crown on his head. As the sun broke over the land, the light sliced over his kingly appearance. His brilliant amber eyes were enameled with electricity. Wolfstar grinned wickedly, "Welcome home."

Stormrunner stood just below the great rock, his chin lifted to center his attention to his father. Wolfstar could swamp him in greeting gifts and praise, but it would never make Stormrunner feel truly home. This place he grew up in was a battleground and he barely survived. *So why had he come back? T*he answer was manifest: Stormrunner belonged here with his father. It was where his blood ran. As Violetsky had said before, *"you cannot escape your dna."*

"I'm not here to battle you, father." Stormrunner proclaimed loudly, showing as though he were addressing the point more to the soldiers than to Wolfstar. His father was no stranger. Stormrunner knew he conquered by planning surprise attacks on his enemies. And he also knew, Wolfstar was cruel enough to attack his own kin.

Wolfstar dipped his head, "I know."

Stormrunner frowned, glancing over his shoulder and back. He twitched his whiskers irritably, still not holding the faintest idea *how*. "How?" He dared to speak his mind. As the tom studied the soldiers still standing blandly, a sudden, horrific emotion smeared on his expression. "What is this?"

Wolfstar tapped his tail to the stone of the rock, signaling for Stormrunner to join alongside him. "Let me show you something." His sound was lavished in tranquility. He, known for his dictator alter-ego, was abnormally calm.

Stormrunner should've been afraid, however, he complied. He began climbing up the abandons, stones tumbling beneath his throbbing paws. He was wearied from the journey back but hated to waste even a minute of his return. As Stormrunner neared the top,

he lost the breath in his lungs. The sight was *astonishing*. The rock was placed so high above the ground, it was as though they were perching on the peak of a mountain. With dawn shattering into the sky, everlasting sunlight stretched across the kingdom. The luster dappled into his eyes; each color swirling into a pastel paradise. The line where the sky tangled with the earth seemed to bow at their paws. Soldiers arranged in orderly lines below, anticipating their next command. *Is this what power feels like?*

Stormrunner could see Wolfstar clearly bathed in the orange light of the sun. His father met his eye. "I built this empire for you." Wolfstar's lackluster sadness stung the air. He swallowed the lump in his throat, "It was all yours before you ran away." His father's words were tantalizing. It was as though he was dangling a mouse just before his jaws. The fact this promised land was built for him only left Stormrunner wanting it more. Anyone would want to own a Clan like this.

"But I- I-" Stormrunner attempted to save himself. He was being manipulated by his father; he was a puppet nailed to strings. Wolfstar knew no one would turn down the offer to rule a beautiful empire, especially if they knew it was made for them. Stormrunner, now in his head about wanting this Clan, wouldn't leave if he believed it was his. So now Wolfstar could keep his son and his kingdom.

Wolfstar leaned in closer, smoothing his dark gray hairs. "Here's a word of my advice," he spoke softly into Stormrunner's ear. His striking amber eyes focused on the forest-top view his son was so caught on. "Cherish the view while you still can." And that was that. Wolfstar waltzed away, leaving Stormrunner lost in a never-ending labyrinth of his torture.

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xvii | the last echo

[image]

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Dawn arose pink saturated with mourning. Dawn didn't arrive on the usual, soft clouds crumbled with colors in the sky. Dawn was usually a new beginning, a chance to start again. Instead today, daybreak was drowned in suffering. Mist dotted the air, forming a lingering blanket of sticky sadness. The Clan cats were all gathered, exhausted from waiting throughout the night to hear the news of their leader. Despite the temptation of sleep weighing down their eyelids, they stayed awake waiting. They were waiting and waiting; time easily slipping from beneath their paws as they foresaw the tragic news; *their leader was dying.*

Hidden away under the shelter of a den, lay the breathless leader. She was strewn helplessly on a cold block of stone, her eyes earnest with the color gray. She was breathing but a bit, her sides lifted painfully to feed her collapsing lungs. *Laying there*, Molesnake studied grievously, *Echostar looked as though she were already dead.*

The pale brown tom rested patiently beside her, this thin tail swept over his paws. He ached to see his mother in such a way. He wanted to cry to her, he wanted to tell her to keep holding on, however, he held his tongue.

Echostar could feel the growing sense of sadness seeping from Molesnake's aura. It tingled through her paws and then suddenly vanished, leaving a dark cloud covering her heart. "StarClan will never forgive me." She breathed softly, her voice a bare whisper. "But last-minute decisions tend to be the right ones."

Molesnake frowned, he wasn't quite sure what his mother meant. Even so, he wanted her to spare her breath. "No, mother-" He attempted to cease her speaking softly.

But Echostar continued. "Falconrain," She beckoned with an unrelenting cough. Her throat was dried from the ravenous sickness that held her hostage.

The tortoiseshell pricked his ears. He was sitting in the back, allowing Molesnake to have his space. After all, he was Echostar's biological son, it was only fair he was the one to wish her goodbye. Falconrain chewed his lip enviously as he wandered closer.

Echostar's ethereal eyes fell onto him then to Molesnake. "You are brothers now." She spoke raspily, "Not by blood but by soul." An unexpected wave of tears glossed over her eyes. She seemed to be a sea at storm when imagining of her sons fighting. "Please protect each other." The colorless leader begged morosely. Echostar inhaled a hoarse breath, "Falconrain," She focused on the mottled tom. "You must learn to control your emotions or they will control you." Echostar's words sliced through the tom agonizingly. He knew what she was going to say next, "So, I think it's better if Molesnake takes the place of leader, love."

Hatred swarmed through his thick fur on his coat. He opened his mouth to testify, but no words appeared. Falconrain scrunched his face in rotting jealousy, he had waited for felt like centuries to lead WindClan. And now the moment disappeared from beneath his paws. Falconrain yanked away from Echostar, cowering in the corner of the den. He turned his back to his so-called "family," not allowing them to see his discontent.

Echostar nudged Molesnake with her dry nose. "Bring in-" Her breath fazed for a second. The pearly-colored she-cat coughed loudly. "Violetsky."

Molesnake was bemused by her request but obliged anyway. The creamy-haired tom nimbly parted through the streams of vines, slightly sticking out his head. As he did, the crowded Clan raised their gaze, waiting for the tom to speak. Molesnake cleared his throat, "Violetsky." He beckoned then turned away and slipped back into the dark oasis.

Violetsky stepped after the mournful tom, her thoughts crisscrossed over the fact of Echostar wanting to speak to her. The vines trickled

down on her back as she poked herself through. A sharp scent stung her nose, it emanated of dead flesh. She blinked a couple of times, nearing the unmoving leader.

Echostar's face subsided a broken smile. "Violetsky," She breathed barely. "St-Stormrunner is still," Her words were suspended by her suffering. Her sides surfaced and then collapsed. "Good. You can still bring him back." Her hushed words sent goosebumps glazing above Violetsky's skin. Her whiskers twitched sadly.

Molesnake placed his paw on his mother's side, concern. "Mother," His voice was shuddering with fear. He knew the moment was coming close, the moment where Echostar would join the rest of the stars.

But Echostar wasn't afraid. She gazed into Violetsky's star-like eyes; the last thing she would ever see. Echostar gulped down a heavy breath, "Fight." Her voice echoed. *"I want the Rebellion to fight."*

Violetsky couldn't move, it was as though her paws were glued to the ground. Her heart raced in her chest like a wild horse. Ever since she first arrived at the camps, Echostar was avoiding strife. But maybe there was something deep in Echostar that had hope. Perhaps it was Molesnake's return. Or maybe it was something she recognized in Violetsky's eyes, a brilliant lavender flash of freedom.

"Mother!" Molesnake shook the white-furred she-cat. Tears trickled down his face. He continued to jar her, but she made no movement. *Echostar was dead*. Molesnake's ducked his head, devastated. Rain-like droplets crawled down his face and splashed onto the ground.

Falconrain was standing there too, bathed in sadness. Yet, Violetsky could see something else was tormenting him. His thorny eyes were unrelenting, however, she could read him like an open book. She peered harder but was disrupted by Molesnake's grumble, "Let's take her out to the Clan. We shall sit vigil for her."

The emotionless sky thundered of loss. The thin, silver clouds were gauzy with anguish. Goodbyes were always the hardest part of life because all that beared left were the memories. She was carried out by her two sons, her lifeless figure settled peacefully along their

shoulders. They strode through the cluster of cats as if they were holding a coffin. The cats bowed their heads respectfully as the toms passed, droplets of sadness freckled beneath their eyes. Molesnake and Falconrain delicately placed the body in the center of the camp, allowing the good friends of Echostar to pay their regards. Kits and young apprentices scurried up to their former leader, laying brightly colored flowers in her fur. Her once warm wool was now buried in gardens of love. All Violetsky could think was that Echostar looked beautiful. And that's how the rest of the Clan wanted to remember her too; beautiful, kind, and a true leader.

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xviii | not the villain

[image]

caution: mention of suicide
aesthetic made by dawnbreeze-

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"Falconrain!" The screech of his name resounded over the hills. The echoes rattled through the swaying grasses and voiced in every side of his head. His world was spinning, blurs and colors galloped beneath his eyes. He kept running, his sore paws thumping as they pushed against the ground into furious speed. He couldn't think straight, every thought fell apart. But one thing he knew for sure was; *I don't want live anymore.*

Violetsky chased after the tortoiseshell tom, her breath growing heavier with each extensive stride she took. She followed his trail through the meadows, the grass crumpling after his paws. She didn't know where Falconrain was going but she refused to go of another strong leader.

The tom finally slid to a stop, his claws anchoring him into the ground. Violetsky peered ahead, a frown crinkling along her expression. She was puzzled as to why Falconrain had stopped so suddenly. That's when she realized, the ground had come to a drop. Falconrain was standing an inch away from the edge of a gorge. *He wanted to jump.*

"Falconrain," Violetsky coughed over her heavy gasps for breath. Hearing the water roar at the bottom of the gorge sent terror prickling down her coat. "What's going on with you?" The gray she-cat ruffled her sweaty fur, lifting her lavender eyes to study the tom.

Falconrain turned to contemplate the she-cat behind him. There was a violent shine in his green eyes, something that sparkled of self-destruction. His muzzle twitched sadly, "Leave me alone."

Falconrain pulled away sharply, growing closer to the edge. Inside his mind, the water was luring him in. He could hear the liquid, tossing and turning while *begging* him to jump.

"You're a good warrior, Falconrain." Violetsky's gentle mew intercepted his delusion. She inched towards the shattered tom, trembling convulsively. The thought of witnessing Falconrain plummeting to his death made her stomach churn sickly. "Don't do this."

Falconrain thrashed around aggressively. "You know nothing!" He shouted, his multi-colored fur lifting into a bundle of spikes. He unsheathed his claws which looked like diamonds in the pale light of dawn. "Don't try and save me, Violetsky." His voice was hard with demand. "I'm already too far gone."

The two felines stood, the silence was deafening between them. The wind caressed along their furs, lingering into the silence. Falconrain inhaled a deep breath, the sight of the hills tapering into the pale pink sky calmed his thoughts. He moved into a sitting position, binding his tail over his paws. "For all of my life, I've been fighting the same battles over and over." He softly began, staring out at the lavish view. Falconrain was drawn into the ocean of his memories, drowning under the waves of old visions. "It never ends."

Falconrain sounded like a different cat when he was soft. Violetsky had always known the tough, demanding soldier; seeing this side of him filled her with pity. She moved up close beside Falconrain, staring at him. "Then we'll make it end." Hope coursed through her. It was thrilling; it the sort of feeling that could kill fear. "I just need you to hold on Falconrain."

"But I've had enough," The sadness crawling down his eyes was what made Violetsky's heart shatter. She knew, from the very first moment of meeting this tom, that he was broken beyond repair. He was always so angry. If he were a statue, he would stand on blocks of wrath. Falconrain's claws trembled as he gripped at the ground under him. "I should just end it all." He barely whispered, considering the gushing gorge below him.

Violetsky slowly swung her head. She lay alongside Falconrain, her

tail touching to his side. "Why?" She was bold enough to ask. "Talk to me. Tell me everything."

With another deep inhale, Falconrain decided his friend was right. He needed to clear the stones from his chest or he would never be able to breathe. "I never knew my parents. I don't remember them either. When I was not even a day old, they left me to die on the side of the thunderpath." The tortoiseshell tom searched through the clutters of his memories, trying to bring back some reminisce of that time. But there was nothing, only a dark cloud of loneliness hovering over his heart. "At the same time, Echostar had just lost Molesnake. He had been stolen from her by Wolfstar."

Violetsky's eyes lifted in surprise. *How could Wolfstar do such a thing, especially to his own sister?* The gray she-cat wondered. Perhaps there was more to this story than Violetsky had realized.

Falconrain continued, "Echostar was walking alongside the thunderpath and that's when she found me. She rescued me and brought me back to WindClan." He ruffled his fur, easing his harsh grip on the ground. Finally having someone to listen to him relaxed his mind. "No other family wanted me so Echostar decided to raise me herself." Falconrain glanced over his shoulder to view Violetsky, happy to see she was still paying attention. "It's a long a story after that but eventually mother shaped me into her perfect, little soldier. And she sent me off to fight her battles."

Violetsky grimaced, feeling a question arise to her tongue. "What was that like?" The she-cat once thought she had seen all things terrible; torture, violence, destruction. But it never occurred to her that other cats have been through worse. "War, I mean."

Falconrain let out a faint snort. *Was Violetsky really asking him such a thing?* "It's like your waking up to a living nightmare." His words sent a dangerous thrill into the air. "There's blood everywhere; it's under your claws, it's clogged in your eyes, it's melting into your fur." The tom began to describe the physical feelings of the war; hearing the trumpets of screams, feeling claws rip into your spine, watching your friends die around you. Falconrain hesitated after a minute, gathering his thoughts to proceed. "But it's not only the physical scars that stay with you, it's everything else you feel. I

wake up *every day* with a storm of guilt hanging over my head. I can't help but think, why did I survive and my Clanmates didn't? Shouldn't I be in StarClan with them?" Falconrain quietened down, his acidic eyes burning holes into Violetsky. "Why did StarClan choose me?"

A chill shivered through Violetsky's bones. Whether Falconrain was being rhetorical or truly asking, Violetsky answered. "Because you are the heart of the rebellion." The she-cat's voice softened as she continued to speak, "You are the only hope the forest has in getting rid of any evil. The forest needs you alive. WindClan needs you alive, Falconrain." At that moment, while studying the battered war-dog, compassion danced in her chest. "I need you alive," Violetsky admitted, a shine of tears glistening her eyes.

"Why would you want such a thing?" Falconrain suddenly erupted, his once fiery ego coming back to him. He yanked himself away from the she-cat, stepping even closer to the ledge. Violetsky lost the breath in her lungs while watching the tom dangle himself just before the fall. Falconrain spat bitterly, "I ruined Stormrunner, I tried to kill Molesnake, I even scared my mother to death. You should hate me."

Violetsky shook her head quite vigorously, wishing the tortoiseshell would move away. "I don't." She jumped to her paws, gazing into his cutting eyes. "Because you're a good tom, Falconrain. You're not the villain."

And that was all she had to say. Falconrain let her words sink into his blood. And as he did, something changed about him. For once, he felt hope. The faint feeling was ghostly to him, it outweighed his fear. *He didn't want to die anymore.* Falconrain swiftly backed away from the gorge, falling back into the oasis of the meadow.

Violetsky let out a long breath of relief, pleased to see Falconrain was still standing before her. She smiled, "Let's go home."

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xix | know mercy

[image]

aesthetic made by lypophrenia-

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A faint fluttering in the air awoke him from his abyss. However, the blackness under his eyes was comforting; an oasis he didn't want to leave. A pattern of sunlight lingered through the green leaves on the trees, decorating patterns onto the ground. The pale luminescence flickered over his eyes, pulling him sharply from his sleep. The exhausted tom stiffly sat up, every inch of his body burned with ache. He was starting to think that perhaps sleeping without a nest or protective den was a bad choice. Last night, Stormrunner refused to sleep in the camps with the other soldiers and he didn't trust his father enough to sleep in his hollow. So he found a small patch of grass between thorny shrubbery to rest on. Shaking away his thoughts, the gray tom stretched out his sore limbs. His jaws opened into a wide yawn, never before had he felt so tired. Everything hurt, his legs, his head, his heart. Stormrunner, easily drawn to the idea of more sleep, fell back into a stretched-out laying position.

Then there was that same fluttering again. It delicately *swished* the leaves on the bushes, capturing Stormrunner's attention. "Soldiers," A familiar voice arose, shattering through Stormrunner's attempt to sleep again. The gray tom pricked his ears, hesitantly waiting for another noise. Stormrunner silently crept to his paws and circled in front of the thorn bush. His single blue eye rolled forward to peer through the tousled brambles. "Are we ready to fight?" The same, heavy voice repeated. And suddenly, it all came clear to Stormrunner. The sound came from his father, Wolfstar.

The elegantly proud dictator stood straight before two of his scrawny soldiers, his structure built strongly like a king's. He lifted his chin sternly, focusing his two fire-like eyes on the fighters. The two toms trembled slightly, sparing a worried glance at each other

before continuing. "We're short." Finally, a brown tabby mumbled. "Another one died today in an accident."

Although Stormrunner was left to observe with one eye, he could patently see the fury awaking in his father. When Wolfstar didn't receive what he wanted, nothing good happened. It was in a matter of seconds when the large leader lifted his razor-sharp claws over the tabby. The silver lining on the claws glimmered under the beams of sunlight, sending a threatening message through the atmosphere. Wolfstar snarled, "Why don't you do anything right?"

Without any further distractions, Wolfstar was about to thrash down his claws when at the same time, Stormrunner slithered forward to watch closer. His front paws *snapped* on a twig.

At the deafening noise of the branch shattering, three sets of vivid eyes twisted to see Stormrunner lurking behind the bushes. Wolfstar's amber optics squinted into two almonds, sending a thrill of emotions down Stormrunner's spine. Realizing there was no turning back, the fatigued feline drove himself through the bush. He pushed past the biting thorns, fully revealing himself to the group.

"My son," Wolfstar meowed somewhat unamused. He glanced over at the two cowering soldiers then lowered his claws. "You're just in time."

Stormrunner followed his father's eyes to the cats. They casually dipped their heads in gratitude, blessing the colorless tom for sparing their lives. However, Stormrunner didn't think of it that way. In what world could he possibly be a hero? "Father, what's going on?" He turned his attention back to his sire. He remembered, before he interrupted them, they were discussing a fight. "What fight?"

The fluffy-furred leader simply grinned. His alabaster teeth sparkled dangerously; either he was entertained by such ignorance or he loved to deliver unfortunate news. "Stormrunner, don't you use your head?" Wolfstar suddenly snapped, sending a jolt of alarm through his son. "I'm bringing a war to those mouse-hearted rebels. I know they're sheltering in WindClan." Anger blurred his eyes like gray smoke. The topic of his sister's rebellion didn't ease well with

Wolfstar as all he wanted to do was destroy them. "Once they're dead, the forest will be all mine."

"No-" Stormrunner suddenly thought of Violetsky. He was flooded with a dull sense of panic, his worst fear was losing her. And if Wolfstar was given his way, she would surely be slain. His alarm was also increased by the fact that the Rebellion was small. They were no match for WolfClan's enormous, powerful armies. The Rebellion would need a miracle to survive.

"Oh yes," Wolfstar howled, watching as Stormrunner paled weakly. His flame-hued eyes aggressively touched into Stormrunner's. "And you'll stand with us." It was a demand; Stormrunner had no choice but to join his father. A wave of shivers seized his spine.

However, Stormrunner still didn't understand what his father was telling. "What are you proposing?" Before he escaped with Violetsky, Stormrunner was his father's right-paw. He was next in line, he was the heir to this tragic kingdom.

Wolfstar's eyes suddenly darkened as he thought. Something evil stormed about within him. "Stormrunner, you will fight as a soldier." The tom twitched his whiskers roughly. "Because of your past treachery, you are no longer my apprentice."

But it didn't make any sense. Every word Wolfstar spoke seemed not to be real. For a faint second, Stormrunner wondered if he was delusional. He shook his head slowly, a disbelieving expression cast on his face. "But I'll die."

Wolfstar inhaled a strong breath, thinking. As Stormrunner's kin, he was expected to protect his son. He was expected to feel some sort of sympathy or dishearten. But as no cat should forget, Wolfstar doesn't know mercy. "*Exactly.*" He barely hissed, sending hot shivers through the atmosphere.

Stormrunner's words were jammed in his throat. He wanted to speak but had nothing to say. All he could simply do was stand uselessly and heed the heartless cat he once thought of as a father.

Wolfstar slipped to his feet, shifting around to leave. But before

disappearing entirely through the shrubbery, the feathery leader twisted around once more. He focused on Stormrunner, his eyes blaring holes through his son's broken gaze. "I'm sorry son." He said without any trace of true condolence. "But there's no doubt in my mind that you won't make a great *soldier*." And with that final remark, Wolfstar turned around and vanished from sight.

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author's note: this book is slowly coming to an end, only two more chapters after this one. and fun fact, the third and final book will be called *soldier*.

xx | in a heartbeat

[image]

aesthetic by bunnyskiies

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At this hour, everything looked golden. The sun was tilted slightly in the cloudless sky, it's shine bleeding down onto the never-ending fields. The grasses were freckled with a greenish-yellow hue as they delicately swayed in the warm winds. The silent tom let the mellowing sights consume him. For once, in what seemed to be a very long time, he was at ease with the world. He was relaxed, he wasn't fighting.

The multi-colored male cat sat on the outskirts of the camp, becoming hot beneath the sunshine. His eyes then softly drifted from the scenery to a certain she-cat. He studied her, his eyes focusing like a blurred camera. She looked euphoric, she was similar to a summer dream in her soft appearance. As she played in the long grasses with her son not a thing about her seemed spoiled.

Falconrain let his mind stir as he became flushed with thoughts. He knew he would forever be in debt to that she-cat. How do you repay someone who has saved your life? The question burned him painfully. It was another reason to feel guilty, another reason to feel like he cheated death. Falconrain was abruptly caught off guard when the feline's violet eyes melted into his. Her face glowed with a simple smile, sending a wave of peace rocking through the tortoiseshell.

As if he were tied to a rope, Falconrain had the strong urge to approach her. He stood up rather quickly and began to wade through the billowing green. After each paw he pressed into the soil, what felt like a spark of strength would coarse through his veins. *"Falconrain."* The sharp beckon of his name coldly sliced through his illusion. The tortoiseshell halted harshly and twisted his head to face the owner of the voice.

Molesnake. The creamy brown leader's eyes were hard with severity. He flicked his ears, his head turning to the side as a signal. "Come with me." Thereupon, he slithered away, the long plants bending as his thin body pushed through them.

Falconrain was plagued with hesitation. He was at a crossroads, torn between two paths. He gazed longingly at Violetsky, an emotion deep in his heart daydreamed about spending the rest of his days with her. Never before, had he ever felt so close to someone. But his hazy perceptions were intercepted by cold reality. The tortoiseshell chose his path: he slowly began to follow his brother. Ultimately, leader's word was law.

He met Molesnake sitting rather impatiently in the shade of the shrubbery bordering the medicine cat's den. The shadows fell elegantly over Molesnake, covering in him with a dark appearance. The only thing about the tom that wasn't obscure were his flashing green eyes.

Meanwhile, the other brother stood in the light. Falconrain found comfort in the sun's warmth, it embraced him with loving arms. It made him feel like everything he had lost was returning back to him. He was not willing to leave the light so easily.

"Falconrain," Molesnake inhaled a tired sigh. Any cat could see his exhaustion, the purple bruises forming about his face and the sorry drooping of his eyelids screamed it all. "There's no easy way to put this." His low voice was distressed with something faux. Despite Molesnake's tired aura, Falconrain could see behind his mask of "caring." Molesnake never cared. "I have no choice but to ask you to leave WindClan."

Falconrain was swamped with confusion. "Leave?" The subject came from out of the blue. It was so completely unwarned that Falconrain found himself dumbfounded. *What was Molesnake grasping at,* the mottled tom couldn't help but wonder.

Molesnake tipped his head. "Yes. I'm demanding you leave WindClan at once." There was not a hint of uncertainty in his sound. And deep down, it scared Falconrain. If a dedicated cat like Molesnake truly, *desperately*, wanted something, he would always

get it. He proceeded, "There's a barn on the east-"

"No."

Molesnake's gaze whipped to oppose the face of his brother. He was dismayed by Falconrain's interruption, his mind spun like a whirlwind. "No?" Molesnake was too shocked to properly thread words together. He studied the many-colored tom before him, seeing his defiant side was unexpected. Falconrain was a soldier, surely that should mean he takes orders easily.

However, Falconrain was much more than mindless war-creature. He was a raw ball of emotions camouflaged with fur. The cat's gaze hardened brutally. With each fleeting second, his heartbeat became stronger. He could feel his heart *throbbing* in his veins with extreme passion. Falconrain inhaled sharply, gathering himself before speaking. "I have sacrificed too much for this Clan to just get up and disappear." His mind was tortured with sudden memories. Violence, bloodshed, war, death; it was all flooding back to him. However, Falconrain continued to fight. "I may not have been born in this Clan but I'd die for it in a heartbeat."

There was an abrupt change. At the end of Falconrain's speech, it was as though the atmosphere had shifted. Molesnake straightened his posture and focused his eyes. It was the strangest thing: his view of his brother changed. He no longer saw the broken-winged bird who would do anything for an escape. He no longer saw the troubled violence in Falconrain's eyes. Molesnake saw a rebel. A rebel who had a heart that pumped hope for blood. He smiled, "I was wrong about you." Molesnake paused, his lush eyes flicking back and forth as they soaked in every image. "I hope you can forgive me, brother."

Brother? At hearing the term fall from Molesnake's lips, Falconrain was conquered by happiness. Not in a million moons did he ever think Molesnake would consider him family. The calico found himself speechless, so instead, he smiled brightly.

The new leader dipped his head, obviously trying to hide his embarrassment resulting from displaying affection. A smile sparkled on his features when thinking of his mother's words. He and

Falconrain were certainly brothers by soul. The brown tom lifted his nose once again. "I want you to stay with us." After speaking, Molesnake regained balance to his paws. He moved forward smoothly, striding from out of the shadows and into the sunshine. The light devoured him, it was all he could see for miles. Molesnake then touched his brother's shoulder with the ruffled tip of his tail. His last statement was all Falconrain needed to hear to feel like he truly belonged in this forest. After spending a lifetime of fighting his way through suicidal temptation, he never realized how much he needed these words until Molesnake said them,
"Stay with me."

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xxi | epilogue

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"All cats old enough to run on the moores, gather beneath the Tall Rock for a Clan meeting!" A mighty cry echoed over the fields. With it, his call brought a familiar memory, yet it was so vague no one could remember. The cats scattered throughout the fields lifted their heads, quite aware of the beckoning. They then gradually began to near their home, everyone in different directions appeared below the elevated rock and gathered into a crowd.

The leader looked breathlessly bold standing upon the stone. His pale-colored eyes gazed outwards, soaking in the vivid images of the expanse. Where he was standing, the cold stone beneath his pads, it felt right. It felt like he truly belonged in the moores; generations and generations of his kin had passed down the noble ranking. And now, finally, it was his turn.

Molesnake, who was now identified as Molestar, no longer had the desire to slither around in treacherous evil. He was no longer poisonous with monstrous ways and like the suffix of his name, he had dropped his sin. Molesnake was now a star. He was now the cat others looked up to.

Once all of the WindClan rebels had gathered beneath the Tall Rock, he began. "WindClan, it feels so good to be united." The mumbling cats hushed at the sound of his voice. Many colorful, forward perking ears spun to focus on their leader. Molestar proceeded, "As my first act of leader, I feel it is my duty to elect a new deputy."

Reactions to his announcement consisted of vicious buzzing. The Clan cats frantically whispered with excitement, conjecturing ideas to who the deputy would be. But deep down, they were all hoping the next the deputy would themselves.

"I say these words before StarClan," The dauntless tom regained his cat's attention. "So that the spirits of our ancestors may hear and approve of my choice." A vision of his mother suddenly entered his head. He could feel her soft presence, mellowing amongst the untouched heather fields. Molestar hoped that she was proud of him. "The new deputy of WindClan is Falconrain."

The apprehensive seething ended once the warrior's name fell to the air. The calico tom, perching near the back of the gathering, lifted his head. His glossy eyes were wide with shock, almost as if he was hearing the name wrong. But Falconrain's mood shifted once he saw his brother's reassuring expression. *Molestar did want him as deputy.* A thrill of adrenaline coursed down his spine. Falconrain cleared his throat, "Thank you. I promise to serve and protect my Clan."

And with that, the Clan erupted into cheering for their new deputy. They clearly approved of the choice as many tom's and she-cat's raced to congratulate the tortoiseshell. Falconrain had never been seen smiling so much. His electric eyes then drifted across the clearing to a particular she-cat. His Clanmates frenzy meant nothing if she didn't approve.

The moon-colored feline smiled dazzlingly once her lavender eyes came into contact with his. She solemnly dipped her head, welcoming the novel deputy. Secretly, Violetsky was so very proud of the ex-soldier. In this moment, he seemed to be a different tom compared to the time she first met him. He looked to be no longer suffering. Falconrain was finally at good terms with the world.

"Settle down," Molestar's courteous coaxing silenced the gathering. "I have one last thing I must do before we part ways," He seemed to hesitate with serious sadness. His head dropped to the side as he was lost in a mosaic of memory. "My mother should've done this a long time ago. I apologize on her behalf." Realizing he was still in his Clan's eye, Molestar straightened himself. "My apprentices, Bramblepaw and Rowanpaw, please come forward."

Both of the young warriors were sitting beside Violetsky, one on each side. At Molestar's command, they both synchronized and worriedly gaped up at the silver she-cat. She nudged them both forward, amused by their innocent reluctance. As the apprentices

stepped before their leader, the crowd of cats shrunk into a semi-circle.

"It is time I give you your warrior names." The two apprentices gushed with happiness. Their eyes had a thrilled spark and looked like a million stars. "I, Molestar of WindClan, call upon my ancestors to look down on these apprentices." The brown-coated leader voiced reverently as he gazed at the ginger toms before him. "Bramblepaw," At the mention of his name, the young warrior timidly slid forward. He tilted his head up towards the darkening sky. "From this day on, you will be known as Bramblefeather. For it is your soft heart that makes you so strong."

Bramblefeather. Violetsky loved it.

"And Rowanpaw," The Clan's attention shifted and was placed stiffly over the russet tom. He bowed his head, feeling his whiskers burn from the tinge of embarrassment. Molestar continued, however he didn't recite the usual warrior-ceremony speech. Instead, he strayed from it, marking a new path with his footsteps. "You have suffered greatly from the loss of your brother and our dear Clanmate, Adderpaw. I could've named you after him."

Violetsky shot a worried glance at Falconrain. Her thoughts raced through her mind; where was Molestar going with this? But the tortoiseshell tom simply nodded. Just a painless duck of his head induced the she-cat into a calm state of mind.

"However, what leader would that make me if I plagued you with the shadow of him?" Molestar's endless green eyes were dripping with sympathy. He knew what it felt like to lose someone.

Rowanpaw nodded sincerely. Remembering his loyal brother hurt his heart greatly, nothing would ever compare to the pain of losing him. But Rowanpaw's name did not belong to Adderpaw's legacy. *He would never be known as Rowanadder.*

And then Molestar announced the name. It's sound felt like a revival; like rebuilding a home from its past ashes. "Rowanhope." The name swept into a flurry of optimism and was borne with the wind. "From this day on, you will be known as Rowanhope. For the

reminder that our hope shall always be stronger than our fear."

"My Clan," Molestar suddenly addressed. His dark words ruptured the growing sense of faith. "We are going into battle." Molestar should've held his tongue. A swarm of pelt's bristled into spikes, colorful eyes expanded, and distraught murmurs all brutally attacked the precious moment. But the WindClan leader refused to act intimidated by his decision. "I'm tired of cowering away and I'm especially tired of letting Wolfstar win." His eyes criss-crossed over the faces of his Clan, eyeing their fearful expressions. "We should no longer live afraid. We should no longer have to stand with such tyranny." His Clanmates were gradually easing into the idea. Bit by bit, their furs began to rest on their backs and they were no longer twitching with complaints.

Molestar continued to stand like a god on Tall Rock. His face was structured gravely, threatening a fearless rebellion. "Let our hope of one day having freedom reign over our fear." He swallowed his doubt, the WindClan silence was devising his uncertainty. "Are you with me?"

The afterthought of his words was nothing but silence. The tension of the atmosphere soiled into the ground, the absence of noise was planting it. Falconrain was the first to cheer. Despite everyone else's silence, the tortoiseshell tom *yowled* loudly, throwing his agreement with his brother into the air. Then Violetsky joined in the hollering chaos. As did Bramblefeather and Rowanhope. With each passing second, another cat joined in with the fury of the noise. Soon enough, all of WindClan was bursting with cheering. It was a beautiful symphony. For once in a long time, the Clan was one. Each individual cat, each flashy pelt, was united through the hope of creating a better tomorrow.

The Clan was soon dispersed into separate conversations, everyone was still gathered in the front, chatting away. Violetsky rested near the back, watching happiness come to life. And never before had she truly felt at home. Her adopted son was seeking new adventures, chatting to the younger warriors. Molestar and Falconrain were sharing a rabbit beneath the leader's rock.

The silver she-cat was consumed by warmth. And to think this land

all began as a story, as a myth told her by a ginger tom, showered her in even greater gratitude. Despite her paws being forever scarred by the terrain she traveled across and her skin being bruised with the journey, at least now she could say she was forever home.

Violetsky's lavender gaze then scanned across the clearing. Her eyes were suddenly caught on the bright fur of Rowanhope. She let her thoughts wander when seeing his red-stained coat. Memories of the good and bad pieced together like a mosaic in her mind. If there was one cat she could have sitting with her right now, it would be-
Suddenly, a huge gust of wind seized the camp in its arms. It rippled through the long grasses, forcing them to sway in stilted motion. The breeze then elegantly swirled around Violetsky, caressing her fur warmly. And dancing with the wind came forth a familiar presence. Violetsky let herself ease with the spirit, a ghostly yet soft feeling blanketed her skin. The wind trickled into her ear and then a familiar voice whispered. One she had not heard in a long time. *Adderpaw*. "This is not your destruction. This is your birth."

The end.

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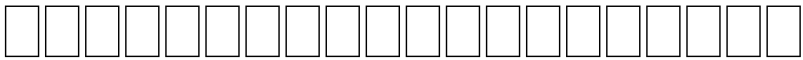

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I am at a loss of words to express how thankful and amazed I am. Never in a millon years did I think my books would ever get this far. I cannot exaggerate this enough when I say all the support means the world to me. To have people reading and loving my books makes not only makes my day but all my nights too. Thank you so much for the endless support.

Before I completely end things, I have an announcement. There will be a third and final book to the series, however it won't be published until a little while. I need a small break from this series, (not that I'm not enjoying it) I just need some time for myself. It's super energy-draining writing these chapters! With that note, I may be publishing a small, new warriors fanfic completely unrelated to this series. So keep an eye out for that!

Finally, if you have any kudos, questions, or concerns please put them below in the comments! I love reading what you guys have to say! Anyway, I hope you have an amazing day. Thanks again for reading. You'll hear again from me soon <3

lots of love,

-acethespace (ace)

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